

THE MISTRESS

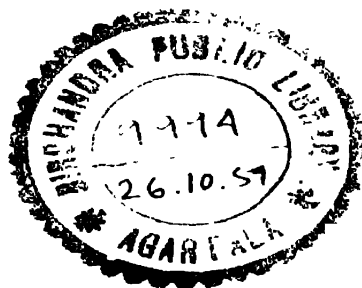
LAURA PETTIGREW is only fifteen when her mother dies, leaving her mistress of Newbiggin, one of the oldest estates in Jamaica. She is surrounded by lazy, inefficient servants, rapacious relatives and scheming neighbours, anxious to lay hands on her lands. But Laura quickly proves their match in ruthlessness—except for Neil Naunton. He, the handsome impoverished son of a neighbouring landowner, unscrupulously plays on Laura's passion for him in order to extract money from her, so that he can marry the daughter of one of the richest landowners in the district. But before his plans have time to ripen, he brutally murders an old negro in a drunken fit, and with Laura's help flees the country.

As Laura's tragic passion for Neil becomes more and more hopeless, and finally, when he is killed in Flanders, impossible, so do her fortunes decline. She becomes the prey of Conchita, Neil's coloured mistress, and of the cunning ambitious foreman Levi whose mismanagement of the estate in his own interests brings it to the brink of ruin. Under the strain, Laura's character gradually deteriorates to the point where she has lost the respect of white neighbours and coloured servants alike. She is Mistress in name only.

THE MISTRESS

By

ADA QUAYLE



MACGIBBON & KEE

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TO MY HUSBAND, WHO IS TO BLAME

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Chapter One

One night when Laura was fifteen years old, Neil Naunton took her to see the turkeys in her mother's turkey pen. The turkeys squabbled restlessly in the darkness.

Afterwards, Laura plucked the straw from her plaits, slapped the dust from her dress and giggled as Neil whispered good night. She heard him crash his way through the banana trash.

She passed through the yawn in the grey wall of Newbiggin, lit the lamp in her room and ran with eager eyes to the mirror. She was surprised to find that her face looked no different. Desperately she threw off her clothes and twisted and turned before the mirror, caressing the round youthfulness of her body. Then she lifted her plaits and twined them into a twin crown on her head. It was no longer a child she saw. Next morning, as she listened to the ragged clang of the kirk bell, she put on her best clothes, layer after layer, and pinned the hair carefully on top of her head again.

Her mother heard the bell as she hurried home from Gayle. She heaved herself forward in the buggy seat and whipped the horses while they strained up and down the dusty Jamaican hills.

Presently she swung through Newbiggin gates and stopped in a swirl of dust. Samson, waiting in the courtyard, saw the nervous trembling of the horses and watched their eyes widen. He noted the hair matted with sweat and the dilating nostrils. He lifted his head and looked at the mistress.

She was squatting on the buggy seat watching him through the veil shrouding her face.

He forced his lips to smile, his knees to bend.

'Mistress,' he greeted her, while his big toes wrapped themselves together in the dust.

After a moment, Mrs. Pettigrew stirred herself and the women grouped round the kitchen door sighed.

'The horses done very well today, very well. They pulled hard like they heard that church bell themselves.'

She flung the reins at Samson and stepped off the buggy. She paused to arch her back, but something in her daughter's sudden appearance stopped the movement.

'Walk the horses, Samson,' she shouted, 'and give them a good rub down. They done well.'

The servant women tumbled towards the kitchen door, curtsying as they went.

'Mistress,' said Berta.

'Mistress,' said Ellen.

'Mistress,' said Lucy.

'Miss Laura,' said Sarah, the cook.

'My food on the table, Sarah?' asked the mistress.

'Yes'm. No'm.'

'Then get it on! I want roast yam, salt fish, plenty oil and a quart of coffee. Lord! I am stiff and thirsty and hot.'

'Yes, mistress,' said Sarah. She bustled into the kitchen and eased her irritation by kicking over Berta's mug of coffee.

Mrs. Pettigrew sauntered towards Laura in the doorway. Her alpaca skirt dragged the ground and obliterated her trail of boot-prints.

'Laura,' she said, removing her veil and placing a hot cheek to Laura's lips.

'Mother,' said Laura.

Mrs. Pettigrew's nostrils twitched as she looked at Laura's hair.

'Going to be a hot day today,' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

'It's hot already,' Laura said.

They entered their home together.

'What kept you, Mother? I mean—we expected you last night.'

'We?'

'Well, I thought you must have been in trouble.'

'I don't get into trouble, Laura. You should know that. But since you thought I was in trouble funny you don't send nobody to see what's wrong.'

'I don't got nobody to send, Mother. You know that. They was all out.'

Mistress Pettigrew threw hat, gloves and veil on a chair, and turned to Laura.

'Perhaps,' she said softly, 'it was a pity the axle broke and I had

to sleep the night at Lawyer Reid. Perhaps you—glad—I couldn't get home.'

'Mother, what a thing to say, when I been just waiting for the ribbon you promised me. Remember you said you would try the Chinaman, out at Gayle see if he had any, Mother. Did you?'

'No.'

The word burst upon the silence.

'But, Mother, you promised. You promised faithfully. You said you would. You don't remember?'

'Laura,' said Mrs. Pettigrew, 'don't you back-answer me. What was on last night while I was in Gayle?'

'Last night?'

'Don't keep repeating what I say. What you been up to? I can swear you been up to something.'

'I don't up to a thing, Mother.' Laura's hands flitted over her head.

'You are lying to me, miss. You been up to something. I don't have to be no prophet to see that. You can't hide nothing from me. Speak up quick before I box your ears for you.'

'I swear to you, Mother, on the Bible I swear an oath I don't do nothing wrong. Don't listen to nobody, Mother. Nobody don't say nothing 'bout me but it's lies. All lies, I tell you. It not true, at all—at all.'

'So!' said Mrs. Pettigrew, 'you don't content yourself with back-answering your mother in your usual impertinent fashion, but you also go and commit sacrilege on the Holy Sabbath Day as well—calling an oath on the Bible. What you trying to prove, Laura? I know you like a book. Look at you—you little hussy, dressed up from head to foot like a harlot!'

She caught a fistful of Laura's shirt front.

'Let me go, Mother,' said Laura, 'let me go!'

'Not until you tell me what went on last night I was at Gayle. You done something. I can sense it. I can see how you look—like a fast woman. Perhaps you been with a man. Oh, God, a man! That's it. You been with a man. A common nigger. You dirty whore! I been expecting this. A nigger!'

Laura was fighting to free herself. Mrs. Pettigrew slashed at her head with the riding crop. Her hair uncoiled itself and cascaded down her back. Before Laura could reach out for the crop,

Mrs. Pettigrew shoved her to the ground. The crop entangled itself in Laura's skirt and rent it.

'Now, get up,' said Mrs. Pettigrew, holding the crop ready. Her lips were drawn back over her gums and sunlight burnished her moustache.

Laura was breathing rapidly and crying. She did not want the servants to hear.

'I believe you would like me to be a harlot, Mother. Look at you. You look so pleased because you want to think I'm nothing but a whore——' She stopped as her mother pulled her upright and slapped her face sideways.

'I am going to get away from you! I will get away from you! You hate me! You hate me same as I do you. Everybody knows. Aunt Mabel knows. You hate me because I am young and beautiful and you are so old—so old and ugly.'

Suddenly the tension went out of Mrs. Pettigrew. She threw the crop on the floor and laughed. She sounded content. She stretched with enjoyment.

'How you going to connive that, Laura? With your nigger man? Even that poor fool Prue when she couldn't do without a man any longer took white trash. Pshaw! You got nowhere to go but here.'

Mrs. Pettigrew went out of the room. There was evidence to be found at once before Laura hid it. She searched her daughter's room swiftly. At last, she stood back and glared angrily about her. It was not here. Then she pounced upon the bed and lifted the mattress. There she found what she sought, rolled into a ball.

'Ah!' she said. She shook it out and examined it leisurely. Her muscles relaxed. She went into the dining-room and sat by the window to watch Laura. It amused her to see Laura stumbling about in the banana trash, among the turkeys.

Samson sat on the mortar. It was Miss Sarah's seat. As soon as she came back into the kitchen she would shove him off it—that is, if he did not slip to the floor quickly enough.

This promised to be an unusual Sunday for Samson, and he was happy. The horses were too tired to go back into the buggy shafts, and Missis had told him nothing about hitching up another pair.

He soused his bread in the mug of coffee and sucked it in with his lips.

'“Walk the horses, Samson,”' he said, and slapped his thigh.

'You go—on—' said Lucy.

Samson sucked his teeth, then giggled.

'They hear church bell too.'

'Lawks—me—God—oh!' said Lucy. 'You too saucy again. Make Missis catch you. See if she don't beat you up.'

'No church today, Miss Luce.'

'That's why you so spry, eh? Parson Bickett don't got you to call to the mercy seat today, eh?'

'Him gwine vex, him gwine vex so till, Lucy.'

Sarah came into the kitchen. 'You clear out, Samson,' she said.

'Don't let Missis catch you in here. She in bad mood.'

'Pshaw!' Samson said to annoy Sarah.

'Me telling you,' said Sarah. She eased him off the mortar and continued. 'She slang up Miss Laura already. Me hear them a-carry-on. But you think we could hear? Shit! She in bad mood, man. Me telling you.'

'She no beat the pickney?'

'That no fool question, Samson. She beat the pickney! What else?'

'Lawks—me—God—oh!'

'She a-walk up and down the turkey pen a-cry!'

'Lawks!'

'Her duppy will haunt it!' said Lucy.

Samson hastily finished his food and hid the pan behind the kitchen door. If there was to be trouble he intended to be far away, watching the horses. He did not miss sitting below Parson on the mercy seat this once to fall into trouble with the mistress. Thinking of Parson and the mercy seat made him belch—just as if he was in church.

Samson shook his head at the complexity of what should be simple, and sucked at his rotten tooth. He began to dream.

When he returned from dealing with the horses, he intended to do justice to this day of rest, lying on his back, snoring under the speckled shade of banana leaves.

'Samson.'

He went still all over.

'Put the animals back between the shafts and be quick. We don't got all day.'

'You is—you is going to church then, mistress?' he asked.

Mrs. Pettigrew paused long enough to watch the hope die in his eyes.

'H'm!' she said.

The old man's lips hung loose. They were moist and purple. He could see now how stupid it had been to dream. Mistress would go to church today, as she always did.

Parson himself agreed that Mistress Pettigrew was the 'cornerstone' of the church. She had built it, furnished it, and, as everyone knew, she picked the parson for it. The church bell—which had started to ring the second warning—was always kept ringing until the mistress arrived. Mistress was never late for church. Parson and the bell-ringer kept that true.

'But Parson only a boy, only a white boy,' Samson muttered, 'and I try and try, but my head just nod off in the sermon and my eyes shut up and I just can't stop myself sleeping. Then I wake up and belch.'

Samson went to get his neckerchief and top hat from a nail in the stable. Whatever happened, he would start for church with his dignity as his position demanded, though not today in his squeaker boots. His boots were for really important or exciting events, like funerals or garden fêtes or a visit to Busha MacKenzie. This last honour Samson coveted. But it had so far been denied him.

Laura came when summoned and seated herself before the food.

'Let us pray,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. 'Dear Father Which art in Heaven, grant that we bring clean lips and hands and hearts before Thy table, oh Father. Take from us meanness and make us truly thankful of Thy abounding bounty. Amen. Sarán!'

Mrs. Pettigrew sat back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. 'When last you cobwebbed this room, Sarah? Look at that.'

Laura and Sarah looked. They saw a thread of cobweb dangling from the ceiling.

'Is not my job, mistress,' Sarah said, 'is Berta——'

'Berta? Berta? It is your job. It is your job to see this room is clean for me to sit in—to eat in. Just try to bear that in mind for the future, Sarah.'

'Yes, mistress.'

Mrs. Pettigrew was cutting up a roasted yam-fob as she spoke. She put some on a plate and passed it to Laura.

'Mother. That's too much.'

'Too much? Nonsense! You need it, believe me. You need to eat, I am certain.'

She smiled and placed a few flakes of roasted fish beside the yam. The fish was dusted with wood ash.

'Eat up,' she said.

'Couldn't I have a cup of coffee?' said Laura.

Mrs. Pettigrew heaped her own plate with yam, banana, fish and oil and began to chew. Laura watched the ear-rings bouncing against the frill of her neckband and her mother's jawbones steadily sawing.

'I said, could I have some coffee, please, Mother?'

'That's better. Remember your manners. You can't get anywhere without them. This is a good floury yam. These bananas are very fine and soft. I think come November I will plant out another ten acres or so of banana. I been thinking it over. We don't seem to get much disease down here and there's money in it. Yes,' said Mistress Pettigrew, gazing through the window at the turkey-cock spreading its tail, 'I will plant another ten acres. A gamble, of course. You got to gamble.'

She stopped to help herself to more bananas.

'Come on, don't lag behind. You must eat.'

Mistress Pettigrew laughed.

'My throat's dry, Mother. If I could have something to drink . . .'

Mistress Pettigrew put down her knife and fork.

'If you mention drink again until you have eaten I will box your ear-drums out.'

She stretched her chin out as she ate her food.

'Naturally, something will have to go. But—you expect that. In this life you don't get nothing for nothing. It's all a big sacrifice. You get one thing—it's all a swap. Cane not really paying. It will have to be cane. There's money-making in bananas.'

She took the last banana, and when she had eaten it she licked her fingers. She smiled at Laura.

'Of course, I can do this, Laura—you can't.'

Every day she said this, thought Laura. She finished her meal and looked at her mother.

'Now! Coffee, Laura? Here you are, then. Now I want a little chat with you. Careful,' she laughed, 'don't spill it. Drink it up while it's hot. All that good goat's milk is real flesh-building. Do you good.'

'Tell me who the man was, Laura.'

Laura's cup clattered against the saucer. Mrs. Pettigrew's fingers rested for a moment on Laura's hand.

'You think yourself smarter than me, I know. I am "so old and so ugly"—or so you say. So. Because you think that, you think you can bring your loose living into my house.'

'Mother, please stop. Please! The servants will hear you.'

'Servants? Pity you didn't think of them before you cheapened yourself, rolling like a slut in the banana trash with some nigger. Who is the man? I demand to know.'

'There was no man, Mother. I—I am tired. I don't feel well . . .'

'In the family's way, I shouldn't wonder.'

'How can you speak such shameful—horrible things to me? Can't you see there isn't a grain of truth in them?'

'Not a grain of truth? Not proof? Then, miss, what's this?'

She displayed the garment found under the mattress.

Laura began to tremble.

'Cut yourself, eh?'

'Yes. Yes. I did,' said Laura.

'In that case I intend to examine you—to make sure you don't hurt too bad. Go to your room and undress yourself.'

Laura was too weak to move. Her mother propelled her, supporting her under an arm.

In the kitchen the women whispered furiously.

'I couldn't catch it quite,' Sarah said, 'but she gwine to beat her. Sure as sure.'

'Bitch!' said Lucy loudly.

'You go—on,' said Sarah, 'and you will get a beating too.'

'She can't beat me,' Lucy said.

'No!' said the women, and they all laughed.

'If me was Miss Laura I would get Chi-ju-ju put a duppy on him and knock him so him fall down stone dead.'

'Lucy, talk gwine put you in bad-bad trouble. You shut up your mouth, gal,' Sarah remarked.

'Well, me would put the obeah man 'pon him long time too,' Berta said.

'You too, Berta,' said Sarah.

'Well, I would,' said Berta.

'Me too,' Lucy said.

'Me too,' Ellen said.

'Maybe you is right and maybe you is not. But Chi-ju-ju and duppy don't hurt Buckra people like Missis. She don't believe there is duppy.'

'G'long.'

'No?'

'No,' said Sarah. 'Now shut up you mouth and go do your work.'

Suddenly they heard Laura scream, and they huddled together, and once more began to whisper.

Chapter Two

The buggy—with the same pair of horses once more between the shafts—awaited the Mistress of Newbiggin. It shifted occasionally as the horses blew and stamped. When the animals did this, the topsoil lifted, swayed and settled again.

Samson was hatching a mound of stones which had been part of the courtyard wall before the earthquake of 1907 destroyed it and cracked a wall of the house.

From where the old man squatted, his eyes slewed restlessly from one pile of rubble to another, without noticing the nine years' accumulation of decay and neglect. Vines old and new twined and strangled themselves. Coarse grass sought precarious root-holds and weeds and prickly grass matted together.

Only the middle of the courtyard was stamped bare. Horse manure lay about, some dry and scattered, some wet and fly-swarmed.

It was hot and still. Samson waited. He lifted his hand and pushed a fly from his lips.

In the kitchen, a pan clattered to the ground. Sarah shouted angrily and Lucy sucked her lips in derision. Then it was quiet again.

Into this silence strode Mrs. Pettigrew buttoning her gloves. Immediately Samson jumped down from his perch to hold the horses' heads. In the same moment he became conscious again of the kirk bell which had been ringing for a long time. Also, as the moment of leaving for church approached, he was seized with a need to pass water.

He hopped from one foot to another, and at a scowl from Mrs. Pettigrew he slipped behind the highest wall.

'Sarah, go and call Miss Laura,' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Yes'm,' said Sarah, and there was a scramble behind the kitchen door.

Mrs. Pettigrew arranged her hat veil more to her liking, then as Samson returned to take the horses' heads she climbed into the driving seat and sat down. She took the whip from under her arm and stood it in its holder. Then she slipped the crochet bag from her wrist and checked its contents, which included a handkerchief (in case the tears came), the collection money for Laura and herself and a morsel to smuggle between her lips if the sermon was too long—as it always was. She disposed of the bag beside her and wrapped her legs in a rug. She was ready to go.

This, Samson knew, meant that he would have to ride in the rumble seat. His belly knotted so hard that he bent over to examine the horses' hooves to let the sickness pass. He knew that if he caught the mistress's eyes they would laugh at him and make him ashamed.

'Take that veil off your face, miss, and show your face to God,' shouted Mrs. Pettigrew.

Samson looked towards the house and held his breath.

'But, Mother . . .'

'A: I say!'

Laura hesitated.

In the kitchen the women whispered.

'Mercy Gawd! She look like the mistress.'

'Oh, Lawd!'

'Amen.'

Mrs. Pettigrew grabbed at the whip.

'Disobeying me, Laura?' she asked.

Laura ripped off the veil and flung it upon the floor. With her head up, she advanced towards her mother. Her cheeks were covered with weals. They were red and swollen. The clothes she wore had been issued from the rag-bag. The shirt strained over her breasts and gaped between the buttons. Like her shoes, her skirt was patched. Both had been cast-off by Mrs. Pettigrew and intended as a gift to Aunt Prue.

'Poor thing,' the women muttered.

Samson was choking.

Laura put the Holy Books she carried on the seat and sat down. She held her knees tightly together to prevent them knocking. And she looked at them.

'Hold up your head, miss,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. 'You are going to look the Holy God in His face. Be joyful, even if you go before Him bowed down in sackcloth and ashes. And in penitence.'

She snapped the whip high over the horses' backs. They reared out of Samson's grasp, and before he could climb on to the rumble seat they were galloping down the drive. Each time the whip cracked the horses went faster, and after every spurt the whip cracked nearer their backs.

And, as the wind flattened Mrs. Pettigrew's veil into a mask, so unreality came over her.

And with it came exhilaration. The weight lifted from her chest. She was rushing to meet Archie. There was a new century stretching in endless promise before her. She had youth and position and money. Suddenly, everything changed. Both Pettigrew and Archie White were scorched out of her.

She shook the pressure from her arm. But the cry remained. The voice cried 'Mother, Mother!' as she who had no mother had wanted to do.

So at last she could cry. She elbowed away the clawing hands.

'No, no!' she said to the voice.

'Yes, Mother, yes! You will kill him. Kill him. . . .'

Kill him, kill him, she heard the echo with the rumble of the wheels, the lurch of the buggy, the cracking of the stones.

'Samson . . .' Laura screamed.

This time Mrs. Pettigrew heard. She turned a white face to Laura.

'You've killed him. Murderer!' Laura said.

Mrs. Pettigrew sat down. She was tired. She saw Laura reach Samson and prise his hands from their hold on the rumble seat. She dragged him into the roadside and left him on the grass. He was conscious. His lips were cut and blood mixed with white marl dust, but he tried to smile with them.

'You all right, Samson?' she asked. 'You don't break nothing?'

'No, Miss Laur', ma'am.'

Laura stood straight before her mother.

'You might have killed him.'

'An old nigger man? Get in.'

'I want your reviving salts, Mother. He badly shook up.'

Mrs. Pettigrew had forgotten to bring the reviving salts.

'He don't need reviving salts. Eh, Samson?' she shouted. 'You find a way to keep you from the mercy seat. Be sure, God will hold it against you.'

Mrs. Pettigrew wiped the sweat from her face.

'We got to take him home, Mother.'

'He can walk.'

Laura was surprised when the buggy stopped at the church. She had forgotten time. All she could remember were the marl-dusted old man and his blood, seeping from his lips and toes.

But when her feet touched the ground and, with her mother, she faced the two rows of obsequious labourers, she felt her face flush with shame. Her nipples hardened into buttons and grated against her shirt. She saw Zaccariah drooling as he stared at them. From everyone, as they bowed or curtsied, she received a shy smile and a look full of curiosity.

'If you people can't do better than this I've a good mind to close down the church. A lot of heathens,' Mrs. Pettigrew said. 'Levi, where is your woman?'

'She got big-belly, mistress,' her foreman said.

'Again! More reason she should come to church,' she said.

Mrs. Pettigrew was annoyed because Parson Bickett was not at the gate to welcome her.

She marched towards the shack, past the man banging the side

of the bell with an iron tongue. He was almost exhausted, and eyes followed Mrs. Pettigrew resentfully.

Parson Bickett bounced down the two slats of wood which made the step, and trotted towards his patroness with outstretched hands. He was trying to look benign and forgiving because his temper was well advanced in heat. Mrs. Pettigrew had held up service for half an hour or more. His eyes were hidden behind the white shutters of sunlight striking his spectacles.

'Mistress Pettigrew, welcome! Welcome! We had all but given you up,' he said. He seized her hand and dropped it quickly. The toughness of her hand always offended his manly dignity.

'Given me up? Given me up?'

Everyone was listening. The bell had stopped ringing. Parson's neck was growing red.

Mrs. Pettigrew threw back the veil on her face as she continued to speak.

'I trust you never to speak like that, Parson. I have been the staunchest member and most consistent person attending this little kirk that I myself built fifteen years ago, Parson Bickett. I have not been to any church but this in all this while, and don't aim to, neither. This is my church. I can't say fairer than that, Parson Bickett. I will never give it up.'

Parson Bickett rubbed his piggy hands on a handkerchief and took off his spectacles to polish them.

'Well, yes. Yes. Quite. That's quite true, of course. We don't know what we would do without you.'

Mrs. Pettigrew shrugged her shoulders and walked towards the church.

'Miss Lanna, how do you—? I hope you are—that is——'

'Without me you wouldn't get far, Parson Bickett,' Mrs. Pettigrew said, and smiled. 'You need a new bell-ringer. I'll find you a good strong man to do the job properly.'

'I don't see—well, this man's been ringing a long time today, Mrs. Pettigrew. And it's a hot day.'

'You're not saying I was late!'

'No, no! You never are.' He blew out his cheeks.

'Very well. That's settled. And it will only be God's work that I do in helping where I can, Parson. Besides, don't he work for Busha MacKenzie?'

'Yes . . .

'There you are! I won't have a man off Busha MacKenzie's land ringing my kirk bell. A more heathen, swaggering hypocrite I don't know. This is not a grand enough church for him. Oh no! He must drive to the big stone church at Gayle where there is a choir and he can get a long carved pew to himself. I don't want my flock mixing with him.'

'That's unfortunate. I dine with Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie at Montrose myself today.'

Parson Bickett focused his eyes on Laura's chest and kept them there.

'Dining? But Newbiggin . . .'

'I meant to tell you at once, of course, that today I couldn't . . .'

'What you do is your concern.'

'Perhaps we had better start the service. There's a splendid attendance for the Communion—splendid.'

'Before you do, I have something to say to you,' Mrs. Pettigrew said.

'Perhaps, after service, Mrs. Pettigrew—'

'No, it must be now. I have that to say to you which must be said before I sit down before God and take the Sacrament.'

Parson sighed.

'Mistress Pettigrew,' he said, 'the congregation has already gone into the church. We should not keep them waiting any longer. Really, I must go into the vestry and finish robing myself.'

'Does that mean, Parson, that you put their interests before mine? Isn't it anything to you that my heart is seething and churning and that a wickedness—of the greatest magnitude—is sitting like a weight on my soul, dragging my feet in misery? Do you want me to go before the altar and take the sweet wine in my mouth and the body of Christ—thinking these thoughts? With my heart in torment.'

Parson paused.

'Come into the vestry, Mistress Pettigrew,' he said, with more patience than he thought he possessed. He knew from experience that to save time and avoid a scene he would have to listen to her. Besides, he was curious about her daughter's appearance. And, although he was shocked by the marks of ill treatment on her face, he felt stimulated by the sharp points on her chest. He set

chairs for the ladies but remained standing. From his fob he took a large watch. He pressed a knob and the lid flew open. He read the time and snapped the lid shut.

'How can I help, Mrs. Pettigrew?'

'By bringing a sinner to the mercy seat and to repentance!'

He giggled, and the fat on his cheeks reached up to hide the sudden interest in his eyes.

'Repentance? You are not suggesting yourself or Miss Laura here, Mrs. Pettigrew?'

'Just so. Yes.'

Laura began to tremble as she saw her mother's plan and the part that she had played in it. That was the reason for the rag-bag clothes, the humiliating finger-marks on her face, the talk of penitence. Her destination had been the mercy seat.

'Mother,' she said, dropping upon her knees, 'Mother, you are not going to—Mother, you can't— Have mercy, Mother. In God's name, spare me!'

'Enough, miss. It is God you must turn unto. Parson Bickett, my daughter is unclean and a sinner.'

'We are all that,' he said. 'It is only in Christ that we are clean.'

'Precisely.'

She pointed to Laura.

'She has sinned. My daughter is a fornicator. Look!'

As Mrs. Pettigrew spoke her hand was delving into the crochet bag.

'Mother! God help me!' Laura whispered. She toppled sideways to the floor.

Mrs. Pettigrew stamped her foot. The moment was spoilt.

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Chapter Three

'You know,' Ellen said, 'the hooman must be mad. She mad, man.'

She finished picking her teeth and stabbed the hairpin into her hair.

Sarah took her time about answering, knowing that the women awaited her comment. She strained the serase tea from the tin can to the cup before she spoke.

'She gwine to dead bad.'

'Lawd Gawd! She gwine to make a real bad duppy,' Ellen continued, pleased to think the cook agreed with her.

'A rolling calf,' Berta said.

'Ooh!'

'With two heads!' Berta finished.

They moaned with anticipated terror.

Samson leaned against the doorpost with his eyes shut and his lips swinging loose. A fly dredged the sore on his lip. He did not heed the women, being caught and trapped in his own memory. He was bouncing along a marl road which stretched for ever around the next bend. He strained to see around the corner and could not and the more he tried to see the louder the hooves beat, every movement growing closer until they were within him. The pounding settled in his head and caused it to sway and shake. His skin was the colour of slate, and sweat collected on his face and flushed it like tears.

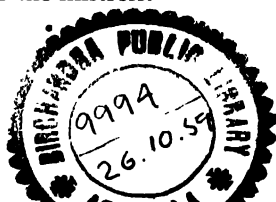
'Miss Sarah!' said Levi Jones. He had crept upon them silently, as was his custom.

'Mass Levi,' said Sarah.

'So! You go fall off the buggy, eh, Samson? What happen, man? You drunk?'

Levi laughed, but not too loudly in case the mistress heard.

Samson slowly freed himself from his vision and turned to look at Levi. Levi was leaning on his cutlass, trying to appear at ease at the kitchen door. Samson did not reply. He did not trust a man whose toes never ever creaked. Besides, it was safer not to risk a reply being relayed and distorted to the mistress.



'You want sinthing, Mass Levi?' said Sarah.

'Yes, Miss Sarah. Me want the mistress. Go call her for me. You know where she is?'

Sarah deliberately pointed her lips in the direction from which Levi had undoubtedly come.

'I think she gone down that way, Mass Levi. I can't rightly say for sure.'

Levi kissed his teeth and for a second looked dangerous. He knew that Sarah was lying and that Samson and the women upheld her by not boldly saying where the mistress was. But there was nothing to be gained by anger. He slowly pulled back his lips in a grin. He could not very well beat up Sarah, Lucy, Ellen, Berta and Samson in Missis's courtyard. He went away as silently as he came.

Sarah stepped over the women's feet and peeped through the back window.

'She still there?' Berta asked.

Sarah nodded.

'She just a look into him hands.'

'Him hands?' said Berta.

'And walk up and down in the trash.'

'I gwine say it again. The hooman mad,' Ellen said.

'I gwine say—you shut your mouth, Ellen, and you all g'long go do your work. You all too chat-chat, altogether. Besides, Miss Laura serase tea cold.'

'She naw go drink that, Miss Sarah,' said Ellen.

'That's my business, Ellen,' Sarah said. She picked up the tea and went to wipe her feet on the mat before entering the house.

'What wrong with Sarah?' said Ellen.

'She think one day she gwine turn white like Buckra people!' said Berta.

'She and that Levi Jones,' Ellen said.

Sarah heard them laughing as she entered the house. She found Laura asleep with her limbs flung about the bed. Her face was dirty and swollen, and her hair lay tangled on the pillow.

The servant woman clicked her tongue as she looked at the child whom she had watched growing to womanhood. Sarah put down the tea. It was cold, but that did not matter. Miss

Laura had never been known to drink serase tea, no matter what the punishment.

She began to tidy the room, watching the door. Mistress must not discover her clearing up after Miss Laura.

Sarah knew that Laura had had enough punishment for one day—even though she could not discover the reason for it. Nobody knew anything direct, and not even Samson would say more than that he fell off the buggy. He would talk neither about the mistress nor the daughter. But she sensed something strange in Samson. He had gone too quiet. Maybe he would do something foolish, like running away, at his age.

'What you want, Sarah?' Laura asked.

Sarah jumped.

'Me didn't know you wake up, Miss Laura. Me just tidying up. Me bring some tea.'

'Good,' said Laura. 'I could do with it. And I am hungry.'

Sarah dragged on her knees to the bedside.

'You want me should get you some ham and some bread, Miss Laura?' she whispered. 'The safe open.'

'Give me the tea. Why should you?'

The tea was cold and a scab of grease floated on top of it.

'What's this?'

'It no serase, ma'am. Mistress say so, ma'am.'

'Take it away. Take it away,' she said. She shoved Sarah and scarcely noticed the cup overturn. The tea splashed the woman and formed a slow-moving trickle on the floor.

'Mistress gwine ask me if you drink it, Miss Laura. What me to tell her?'

'Anything. Tell her I chucked it out the door.' Go on. Run with lies to her. She'll believe you! She'll listen.'

Laura began to cry noisily.

'I don't care. See if I care,' she said. 'I strong. I don't need nobody. Not nobody at all. And if you don't tell her I drink it up see if I don't make you lose your job. You want to lose your job, Sarah?'

'No, Miss Laur.'

Laura wiped her eyes on the sheet, and began to get out of bed.

'I'm hungry. I want food. Put some food on the table.'

'Lawd, Miss Laura, you know Mistress, ma'am. She say not

to give you no food, ma'am. She left the safe door open, ma'am, but she say not to give you no food, ma'am.'

Sarah swung her head from side to side in distress.

'I will just thief out a piece o' bread and a slice o' ham, Miss Laura,' she said. She wiped up the tea on the floor with her apron.

'I will thief it so she don't see, Miss Laura.'

'I want food put on the table,' said Laura.

'But, Miss Laura, she just down the turkey pen. She got a clear view of the dining-room. . . .'

'The turkey pen?'

'Yes'm.

'What she doing there, Sarah?'

'Me don't know, miss. She just a-stare and stare in him hand. Maybe she got a dead dill. She never like dead——'

'Leave me alone, Sarah.'

'Yes, miss. But I will——'

'Get out!'

Some undefined worry fidgeted Laura. She slipped out of bed and looked vaguely round her room, expecting to discover the reason for her agitation. It troubled her to know that her mother was so near—in the turkey pen. What could have taken her to that place of all places?

She began another determined hunt for the sapphire brooch which she wore to church on Sunday mornings. The brooch was lost, Laura knew. She could feel it the instant her mother inquired about it. She had not worn it to church because she had been too upset to bother about it. So she had lied.

Now she began to crumple her belongings in the drawers. She knew that it was important to find the brooch soon. Her mother had always coveted that legacy from Aunt Sophie. Laura had to guard it carefully.

Among her handkerchiefs Laura found a long red hair. It was her mother's. She picked it out gently and crept backwards until she found the bed. She sat down and looked at the hair. It told her everything.

Light coming into the room drew her eyes away from the hair. She watched the afternoon sun, yellow and cool, as it traversed the wall through the opening door. The door moved slowly and silently.

Laura waited for the visitor she expected.

Mrs. Pettigrew was flushed as she entered and closed the door. She marched back and forth between the bed and the door. The muscles in her jaw were gripped tightly. Once she laughed. She did it suddenly and Laura jumped.

Laura sat mesmerized, unable to do anything but follow her mother with her eyes. Her fingers still held the hair.

'Laura,' Mrs. Pettigrew said. Her voice was as calm as it ever was, but behind it the girl could feel that there was suppressed emotion.

'Mother,' said Laura.

'Laura!'

Mrs. Pettigrew was savouring the name.

'Laura, Laura, Laura. Generations of Lauras, woman to woman. An inherited name. What an ugly name. A wicked, meaningless name. Our name.'

She paused, gigantic over Laura, so that the girl could smell lavender and sweat.

'I gave you that name, Laura, and I hated it. It's never done me any good. But, that's tradition. You should know about that. In our family it's the women who look after the traditions. Men? There never was a man worth nothing in our family. Pshaw!'

She began to pace again.

'That's the only name we had a right to pass on. One day, Laura, you will find out the meaning of the name you bear, for it's the brand of the past—and you carry it for ever with you—to the grave. You will find out the deceit it covers, the filth it brings, the envy and hate. And the betrayals.

'But you looking pale. All this talk of inheritance turned you green. And no wonder.'

'Mother,' said Laura, 'you got something on your mind. You can't fool me. I know you don't come in here watching me like that for nothing.'

'You must watch your manners, miss. While you're under my roof kindly remember that. What's that wet on the floor, Laura?'

'It's the—it's the sarse—'

'So! That's how you treat my orders? You just pitch it on the floor!'

'No, Mother. It was truly an accident.'

'An accident. Yes, I reckon so.'

Laura wondered if she detected the slightest sarcasm. But her mother's face wore an almost benign expression which Laura distrusted.

'Well, accidents do happen. I will tell Sarah get you another cup. You want to get over your little attack, don't you?

'Laura, who was the man with you last night?'

Laura's hands covered her mouth. Her eyes grew large.

'Now, dear, tell your mother. You know, I only want to help you. But I want to know who it was.'

She seated herself beside Laura and passed an arm round her shoulder, comfortingly. The rings on her fingers seemed grown into the flesh.

'You see how it is. If you going to present me with a little turn-colour bastard I want to know if it's Levi or Zaccariah or even Samson responsible.'

Something that Mrs. Pettigrew said amused her so much that she chuckled. Then she suddenly became serious.

'I will have to get rid of him quick. Whoever it is,' she said.

'Mother,' Laura said, 'I don't know how you can even suggest such a thing—how you can think that I—and Samson—Mother, what you suggest is nasty and vile and shameful.'

She began to cry.

'So. You think you can get round me by whipping up your anger and crying. But that don't stop the facts, and I responsible for you and your morals. You not even sixteen yet!'

'Only few months off.'

'That's got nothing to do with it. I'll find out who it was if I have to shake it out of you. You know one of the turkey dills dead?'

Laura shook her head.

'So you never got down to the turkey pen today, then?'

'No, no. I never.'

Mrs. Pettigrew pulled Laura to her and looked into her eyes.

'Where's your Aunt Sophie's brooch? You found it yet?'

'I told you, Mother. I mislaid it for a moment. The pin was loose. It must fall off somewhere.'

'You mean you lost it. Well, we must think back to when you wore it last. Not since last Sunday to my recollection and it was

on top of your table when I went to Gayle yesterday. Now. You didn't put it on today at all—at all. So! You had it on last night. Making yourself look pretty. Pretty for some nigger man down the turkey pen, perhaps!

'No, no, no, Mother. No. I never go near the turkey pen.'

She clutched Mrs. Pettigrew's arm.

'I swear to you. I never did.'

Laura remembered then. She remembered pinning it on her blouse to dazzle Neil.

'Don't trouble to deny it, Laura.'

'It's a lie! It's a terrible lie! I never go near the turkey pen!' Laura shouted.

'Then what's this, miss?'

Mrs. Pettigrew opened her right palm. Lying there was Aunt Sophie's brooch.

Laura's lips moved, but she said nothing.

'You whore!' said Mrs. Pettigrew, slapping the bedpost with her right palm. She gave a little scream and looked at her hand. Aunt Sophie's sapphire brooch lay embedded in it.

'Now see what you done, Laura, drawing my blood. Well, after this there's one punishment I can give you. In future I will keep this brooch. You are not worthy of a trinket of your own.'

She left Laura cowering on her bed and went to her own room. Her steps were brisk and loud. She stopped before her dressing-table and examined the brooch with satisfaction. It had a beautiful gem. She opened her trinket box and for a moment gazed with pleasure on the collection of bangles and rings and necklaces. Then she dropped the sapphire brooch on top of them. It lay on the pile, pin uppermost. The pin was rusted.

Mrs. Pettigrew covered the box and wiped the bead of blood from her palm on her skirt. Then she craned her neck in the mirror. It was loose-skinned and red.

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Chapter Four

Laura awoke. She lay quietly relaxed, listening to a horse stamping as it grazed in the yard. She heard the familiar frog-orchestra and the monotonous screech of the crickets. From the encircling hills, and from the village, came the beat of drums. Some of the drums had a high note and a quick beat, others were deeper and slow. As the wind veered, so did the singing rise and drift, voices telling dismally of Death and God.

Near by a dog started to howl, but suddenly coughed and stopped as though it had been kicked in the belly.

It was a friendly night and Laura refused to rouse herself further. Gradually she became aware of footsteps padding under her window. She heard them climb the steps to the door.

Laura smiled. The coach-house cat which she had befriended was persistently optimistic.

'Puss, puss,' Laura said.

She was answered at once by the ginger cat wailing and scratching at the door.

Laura sat up. Phyllis, like any other animal, was not permitted to enter Newbiggin House. They carried fleas, dropped hair and worse, and they stank. But tonight, Laura wanted her friend to fondle. She could talk to it. Phyllis never hurt her.

As she started to leave her bed, someone banged on the front door. She stood still. She knew—despite the light from the drawing-room glimpsed beneath her bedroom door—that the house was empty.

'Who's it?' she shouted.

'It's me, Neil. Let me in, Laura.'

'Neil!'

She ran laughing and sobbing to let him in. Her nightgown, ballooning behind, hugged her knees.

Pleasure made her movements slow. She trembled as she lifted the bar from across the door. That was why she spotted the pimento grain rocking on it before it fell into the carpet. Laura stooped to find it. She placed it on the window-sill, and then

examined the windows. They all had grains of pimento balanced on them.

'Hurry up, Laura. I don't got all night, you know.'

Laura blew out the light. She opened the door and pulled him in. At once they were straining against one another in a demanding embrace.

Laura fought away from Neil.

'You must go. My mother will be watching. She set a trap for us tonight. She left pimento grains on the window and across the iron bar. Neil, you must go. I sure she watching to see outside.'

'Oh, f—k it!' he said. There was something suddenly claustrophobic about the room and Laura. 'What the hell!'

His finger idly circled a tip of Laura's breast until she squirmed and covered his hands with kisses.

'You must go!' Laura said. She pressed his hands tighter against her breasts.

'You don't need to tremble so, Laura! She can't eat you, even if she catch you? Beside, she won't know. She need never know a thing. You can trust me?'

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips lightly.

'Listen. It's me—Neil. It's me!'

'Oh, Neil, I really glad you come.'

'I know. I know.'

'You don't know how I long for you to come all day.'

'Yes, I know. That's why I come,' he said, playing over her with his hands till she moved from rigidity to fling her arms about his neck.

'You want me, don't you? I can smell you want me. You all do.'

He laughed.

'I want you too. My bowels falling out for you.'

'Neil!'

'Afterwards you just put back the little pimento seeds and light the lamp and she'll never know.'

'Neil!'

'We'll fool her.' He put his mouth against her hair and whispered: 'Let's go to your room. Not the turkey pen again.'

He laughed.

'You should see the knees of my breeches!'

'No, Neil, no. I tell you, she watching and waiting to catch us out together. You better go. I'll—I'll—— Please, darling.'

'What's the trouble, Laura. You don't know your mother down with Levi Jones? The cow calving and they got trouble. She won't home for hours yet.'

He slipped a hand inside her nightgown. His breath was hot against her neck.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's have a quick bit of fun. I know you'd enjoy that.'

Laura let him fondle her in silence, while she struggled to come to a decision.

'No, Neil darling, we mustn't do that any more——'

'Any more?'

'Any more—till we married.'

'Married!'

Laura stroked the hair behind his ears and spoke gently.

'Not until we married. Darling, we don't want no bastard pickney?'

'Now, what the hell you talking about? What you mean—married? Why, you is only a child, Laura.'

'No, I'm not. Not any more,' Laura said. 'Don't sound so put out. Mother married when she was sixteen.'

'Talk sense, Laura,' said Neil crossly. He pushed her away so she felt that the fires which warmed her had suddenly gone out.

She followed him to the door, caressing him with her hands so that he should be happy again.

'We could get married on my birthday. That's only two more months, Neil. We could wait. Darling, all we need is—is a little patience.' • • •

'Patience!' he said. 'A little patience! You don't know nothing about it, Laura, coming after me in your nightgown over your bare skin and you talk about patience. I'm a man. Flesh and hot blood!'

He laughed. But there was no pleasure in the sound. He leaned against the door with his arms folded lightly on his chest.

'Don't sound so angry, darling. Perhaps you think it's too sudden. But, we got to think. It's only time before Mother finds out . . .'

'She can't find out nothing 'less you tell her. All you women

can think about is tying a man up. You don't think we can decide for ourselves?'

He spoke angrily, and continued:

'What's that happen in church today? Your parson was telling us about it.'

'Where you see Parson, Neil?'

'Well, the whole lot of us eat up at Busha MacKenzie today. What a place! You should see it.'

He sounded both proud and resentful.

'I didn't know you so friendly with them?'

'It's Mother. She's thick with them,' he said. 'They got a daughter—Prudence.'

He kicked the door with his spurs.

'I know that. A fat, flour-pasty girl. What's that parson say, then?'

'Oh, you fainted in church today. He guessed you unwell the moment he saw you. Speculating, you know.'

'What else he said?'

'Well, I dropped him a hint to shut up his mouth. But of course I guessed. Lord, Laura, your mother is a caution. When I got outside I laughed till I had to hold my sides.'

He laughed again as he remembered the incident.

'You were very clever there, Laura. Just fainting at the right moment like that. My God, you are a caution!'

'I thought my mother was!'

'The two of you! Give me a kiss. What's wrong? You not shoving me away? Just give Prudence MacKenzie this chance and watch her. God! She's just like a stupid cow. All moo-eyes and flesh.'

At this, Laura buried her head in his jacket.

'Neil, you don't want her, Neil?'

'Want her? God, no! I'd sooner go and f—k one of me cows. But it's a regular strain the way she can't keep away from me. It would be a real kindness if I did frig her one day. Put her out of her misery, you know.'

Laura covered his lips with her fingers.

'No. Don't say that. You trying to frighten me, Neil.'

'No, no. Truth. I think her father would like it if I did, somehow. Something going on. Probably give her a fat settlement too—and I could use it, I tell you.'

He began to kiss her at random.

'I can't look at her when you is about. There never was a bitch so hot as you on heat.'

He lifted her and began to stumble through the darkness to her room.

'Put me down, Neil,' said Laura, kicking. 'I told you before. And I mean it. Not till we married. Never again, till we married.'

She struggled and beat his chest. Then she bit his ear. He dropped her, knocking over a chair.

'You don't seem to understand me, Laura, at-all, at-all. When there is to be any talk about marriage, I want to do it myself. Just you remember that. Never was a time some woman or other don't think they can dictate to me. You is all alike. Even my mother. You all want to tell me when to marry, who to marry. That's all my business, Laura. If I want to marry you, I will tell you when the time ripe.'

'The time ripe now.'

Neil sucked his teeth.

'You is only a child, Laura.'

'Not too much the child you drag me off down the turkey pen. You'd better go home. When you turn it over in your mind you'll come galloping back.'

'If I want I can go straight up to Prudence MacKenzie and get all I want there. Don't get fresh with me. I'm no monk.'

'Then why don't you go to her? You just brag and brag about her. Go to Her Mightiness.'

She put her hands on his back and pushed him.

'Go to Prudence MacKenzie. She's not too young!'

'You'll regret this, Laura,' Neil said.

She stood still, listening as he stamped across the veranda and ran down the steps.

He had gone as she had ordered him. She stubbornly refused her desire to call him back. He was angry because he was thwarted. But she was angry at her pride.

Laura listened for his horse moving away. She heard the tinkling equipment on the horse, heard him snap: 'Get up.' She ran to the door then, to call him back. But there was no need. The horse stopped and she waited. He did not return.

Ellen waited for him by the courtyard wall. She was clumsy with desire. Without a word she picked her way after him to the coach-house.

Eventually the bridle shook. The horse chewed at the bit, and Neil Naunton cantered his horse out of Newbiggin gates.

The old man moved quietly out of the horse blanket and followed Ellen into the banana walk, caring nothing for the thing he had witnessed. His path did not run parallel with Ellen's. He took the path which led deep into the banana walk. It ended before a hut of wattle and daub. Here he stopped and knelt. The smell of burning flesh and putrefying matter issued on puffs of smoke through cracks in the wall.

'Chi-ju-ju!' he called.

The coconut mat was moved aside. There was a rush of hot stench. Within, a pot perched on stones was bubbling over a fire of sticks.

Chi-ju-ju squatted inside the doorway.

'I come for a oil-o'-make-me-sick, Chi-ju-ju.'

'What you want cost money, Samson.'

'I got the money, Chi-ju-ju.'

Samson drew his kerchief out of his pocket. He carefully undid the knot and extracted a shilling, which he showed to the obeah man.

'I want a strong oil-o'-make-me-sick, Chi-ju-ju. I got plenty money for it.'

'A strong oil-o'-make-me-sick cost more than that, Samson.'

'I don't got no more.'

He reached for his kerchief, but Chi-ju-ju clawed the money from his hand. He went into the hut, leaving Samson to watch him at his task. The obeah man fell upon his knees before the pot. He rocked, he chanted secret prayers in an unknown tongue while he gathered from the miscellaneous collection upon the ground a feather, the dried ball of a goat, the eye of a cat and the nail of a dog. He ground these together in a mortar and added the scum from the pot. When this was done, he added coconut oil and scraped the mixture into a shell.

Chi-ju-ju handed the potion to Samson.

'You must put just one drop in the food till it done. Is strong oil-o'-sick-me. Don't walk over no cow-shit. Don't let your eye

catch no yam-foot. Don't step over water. Else it won't work. If it don't work, Samson, you don't do it right, at all, at all.'

He stood up to end the consultation.

'How me gwine get it in him food?' Samson asked.

'It won't work if you don't do that.'

'You don't got no other way, Chi-ju-ju? You got my money.'

Chi-ju-ju frowned. He stretched a hand behind him and hooked a chicken's foot from the wall.

'This powerful,' he said. 'You dip this in the oil-o'-sick-me and put your maw where him gwine walk over. Nobody walk over this without him sick. Not nobody.'

Samson seemed doubtful.

'But suppose him don't sick?'

'You done it wrong,' Chi-ju-ju was composed.

Samson tied the chicken's foot in his kerchief and stuffed it inside his shirt, but, as he reached for the shell of oil, Chi-ju-ju laid down his staff between them.

Samson looked into the obeah man's eyes, and saw that they were ringed with dry blood.

'A chicken for the slaughter,' Chi-ju-ju said.

Samson nodded, too scared of the blood-rimmed eyes. The staff was withdrawn. Before he could move, the coconut matting was swinging over the doorway again.

He walked backwards until he was deep in the trees. The blood beat in his temples. When he was out of sight of the hut he recognized the beat. It was the beat of drums. There was a prayer meeting in the village to which he proposed to hurry.

He would be in good time for the climax when everybody sang and clapped and stamped, spoke in unknown tongues, frothed, and testified by falling insensible, one by one, before the preacher's foot-stool.

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Chapter Five

Of a sudden, Mrs. Pettigrew felt the old fear of exposure. She had tried to exorcise it today by handing Laura into the justice of the Church. But this, in the very moment of triumph, had been denied her. All day long she had kept vigil over herself lest she should remember. But here, in the flickering light, surrounded by her servants, the memories came upon her, and the confusion in her mind was as new as ever. There were no answers to the years-old questions when they came. They came, as they usually did with the dark and the stagnant heat. She clasped her riding crop tightly until her knuckles were prominent and yellow under the gloves.

The bottle torches flared. She watched while the labourers wound the rope around their fists and hauled. They chattered as they sweated. Their muscles, like well-greased balls, shunted under their skins.

She had seen this countless times before, but never felt it so intensely, with such satisfaction. It helped her to know that it was for her they dragged the calf from the darkness of its mother's womb, that they did it because she ordained it so.

She listened to them bandying orders and suggestions which no one heeded. And all the time the cow grew weaker, for it was tired.

Mrs. Pettigrew looked up to find Zaccariah's eyes staring at her. He shifted them instantly, but not before she had felt their malice.

It was no discovery. The spite and hatred of others always invigorated her. But tonight she wanted to get away from this tight band of men, all united in their hatred of her, and all armed.

The headache spilled from her crown over her forehead and temples. She decided to go, leaving them with the fiction that she trusted them. It was the kind of flattery they sometimes reacted to, and perhaps there would then be a new calf. They would see the calf licked, watch it totter safely on unsafe legs, beneath its mother's tail, to join the other cows of Newbiggin.

'Levi,' she said.

Levi—who knelt as far away as possible from the others and

yet contrived to seem the busiest of them all—stopped giving instructions and stood up.

‘Mistress,’ he said.

‘I’m going home now. I leaving you in charge.’

‘Yes, mistress.’

He clapped his cutlass under his arm and looked boldly at the others, while Abimalek brought the mistress’s horse. All work stopped at once. As soon as the mistress mounted and rode away from Water Bottom, they relaxed themselves on the ground and prepared to take a bit of rest.

‘What wrong with him, man?’ Zaccariah asked.

‘You don’t hear what she say,’ Levi bawled, swinging his cutlass. ‘Go and born that calf. Get up off you’ backside, Zacci. I is in charge.’

“‘Hoi in chawge,’” whispered Moses. Those who heard laughed. The tobacco screws went back into hiding and they gave Levi a sullen co-operation.

* * *

Mrs. Pettigrew did not sleep well. During the night she stumbled out of bed to swallow a draught of quinine. She was light-headed with malaria as she tossed and sweated and listened and waited for morning and sleep.

During the night her fear-phantoms visited her, one by one. Pettigrew came again to accuse her, to point his finger and say:

‘You betrayed me.’ He said it over and over again. Against the noise of a jalousie falling open in the drawing-room, Archie White also came. But he only laughed, just as he always did. Archie laughed with zest. She had been too subtle with Archie, and in the end, because of it, he had forsaken her. But the ugliest phantom was that of Mabel Naunton, getting old and fat on her veranda. She sat like a spider in the web that Mrs. Pettigrew had spun herself. She knew. But even after twenty years she would not forget.

It was not until cock-crow that Mrs. Pettigrew slept. Before the women came to their work, however, Samson wandered down the drive in the morning twilight, painting Cli-ju-ju’s magic on the ground. It was an enjoyable task, and he frequently stopped his work to snigger.

Mrs. Pettigrew was still asleep when Samson presented himself at the kitchen door. He watched Sarah spit on her fingers before she turned the bananas and salt fish roasting on the coals. He made himself comfortable on the mortar and investigated the colonies of bugs under his arm-pits. He pulled out two bugs and broke them between his thumb-nails.

Presently, as he settled to this task, Lucy, Ellen and Berta came in from the washing. As they lifted their skirts to pass Samson, he hastily jumped to his feet.

'Good morning, Miss Ellen,' he said. He bowed low. 'You want me bring your buggy and pair, mistress?'

'Shut up your mouth, old man,' Ellen said.

'Oh. High and mighty this morning, Miss Ellen.' He laughed. 'Oh, Lawd!'

'Stop you' teasing, Samson, else I turn you out o' my kitchen. You want me tell Mistress you don't come to work till the middle o' the day, Ellen? You expect me to do everything?'

'Lawd-my-God-oh! Miss Sarah! Me eye no only just open, Miss Sarah.'

Samson laughed derisively.

'Mass Neil gum it up, Miss Sarah. No' true, Miss Ellen?'

Sarah, Lucy and Berta grasped Ellen before she could hit Samson. Ellen was a fighter.

'Don't take on, Ellen. Me just joking. If my food no' ready, Miss Sarah, me come back.'

Sarah scrutinized Samson's back. The old man was laughing. A great change had come over him since the day before. Sarah hastily handed round the food. To Ellen she gave an extra banana and a big piece of fish. Gradually the stubborn expression wore off Ellen's face. There was a ring of oil round her lips, and the women alternately chattered or hung silent suddenly on a word.

When they had eaten, the women removed their kerchiefs and arranged themselves in two rows down the steps to comb each other's hair. The combs were made of bone and had six teeth each. Ellen had the shortest hair. Her head was traversed by numerous criss-crossing white rows. The plaits were minute, and as the hair was difficult to grasp she could only expect a small portion to be combed at a time.

'Mass Neil frig you, Ellen?' Sarah asked.

The women laughed into their palms, and Ellen remembered the jigger which lodged in her heel. She began to probe it with a needle hastily withdrawn from her head-kerchief.

'You don't got no mouth, Ellen?'

'Pshaw! No nonsense Samson a-talk, man,' Ellen said.

'Nonsense, Ellen?'

'Him just talking nonsense, Miss Sarah. Him like talk wise.'

'Well, I only wish it was me,' Berta said, hoping to curry favour with Ellen, and so ultimately gain her confidence.

Ellen stopped tunnelling in her heel to look Berta up and down. It was an insolent look.

'Mass Neil wouldn't look at you, Berta. You is too skinny!'

'I don't skinnier than you, Ellen.'

'Yes you is!'

'No I isn't!'

'Yes you is!'

'In the dark,' Sarah remarked, 'they feel the same.'

Lucy alone giggled.

'You got something to laugh at, Lucy? Something sweet you?'

'No, Miss Sarah.'

'Then draw back you' lip over you' teeth then, Lucy.'

'Yes, Miss Sarah.'

'Well, don't fancy yourself, Ellen. If he frig you, no reason he shouldn't do Berta or Lucy or me.'

The women were shocked into speechlessness. Berta pulled Lucy's hair and she squealed. Ellen ploughed her heel with short, desperate stabs.

Lucy leaned against Berta's knees and began to sing.

'When Mass Neil catch you in the night—ooh,

Ooman, lift up and run. Ooh,

And if it is a starlight night, ooh,

Ooman, lift up and run. Ooh.

Lift up you skirt,

Kick up the dirt,

Take the wings of a dove, Ooh—

If Mass Neil catch your chemmy

Good bye to your vir-gin-i-ty.'

'What's all this din for, Sarah?' said Miss Laura.

The women gaped at her.

'I just waiting to bring your breakfast in, Miss Laura.'

'Tell Sampson saddle Jenny.'

'Yes, ma'am,' they said.

Sarah hurried indoors.

'Sarah must be thutty year of age,' whispered Ellen.

'Forty, I think,' said Berta.

'She too old again—again,' Lucy said. They nodded agreement, then separated to their tasks.

Monday was always a very busy day, because it was the day that bananas were cut and taken to the wharves or railway sidings for shipment to overseas markets.

The banana messenger sounded his horn as he approached, telling all in the valleys and over the hills to cut bananas. Along the roads men and women straggled towards Newbiggin to receive their instructions from the headman.

They assembled outside the courtyard wall and settled down to wait with good-tempered composure.

But Levi Jones was impatient as the dew dried off the grass, for he had bad news to impart, and bad news did not improve with keeping. He was looking smart today, as the labourers were quick to notice. He was wearing a clean khaki shirt bought through the back door of the Chinaman's shop early that morning, and his trousers were not tied below the knees with banana trash. The man in charge, he told his woman, had to look the part.

'Mistress coming,' said Mose.

Levi tossed his head and laughed.

'You' eye bad, Mose. That's Miss Laura,' he said.

'Whoy! No' so! No' so!' laughed Mose. Levi was in a friendly mood.

Laura cantered past the labourers without returning their greetings. She did not see them, neither did she hear them. She was feeling the freedom of unsupervised movement. She let the air tickle her nose as she inhaled it. It went over her, caressed her, and made her drunk.

She galloped through the gates of Newbiggin without turning her head. This was a day made especially for her. She laughed as she forced Busha MacKenzie's bullock cart into the roadside,

and lashed out at big-bellied children who dared to come too close to gape at her. She knew most of them—some by their names—but they all knew her, and Laura knew that they were taught to fear her as they did duppies and the obgah man. It surprised her when the hair which she had so confidently coiled on her head that morning fell down her back. Presently the plaits blew open and her hair streamed and knotted behind her.

She had given the horse its head. Now, with pleasure, she could see Naunton and Newbiggin land running parallel to the road. The difference in cultivation was striking. She approved of the stiff rows of sugar cane and the rows of coffee beans which grew on Newbiggin land. The land here looked healthy, the soil was clean, and the crops were lush.

On Naunton land, however, she noticed, not for the first time, but always with surprise, that Neil had gambled heavily with bananas. Other acreage, before dedicated to sugar cane, was also being planted out with banana suckers.

It worried Laura because it was known that to do this Neil had mortgaged land. This, with inherited land, was to Laura treachery. And although there was a good crop of bananas near maturity, a hurricane could destroy a year's work and expenditure in a few hours. And Neil could not afford to fail now. There was herself to be considered.

As Laura approached the Naunton gateway she drew rein and walked the horse. Aunt Mabel did not approve of galloping a horse, for joy had long since died in her. Laura turned in between the giant poinsettia trees which stood one on either side of the gateway. She kicked the horse and cantered up the drive. The house and drive had an unkempt air, as if better days had gone for ever.

Mrs. Naunton was occupying her usual position. She lay flabby in the rocking-chair, tapping the veranda with the points of her boots as the chair moved backwards and forwards.

Laura flung the reins over the railing and dismounted. But for the rocking and the tapping, Mrs. Naunton might have been asleep. Occasionally her jaws gripped and her lips pursed, and it became obvious that she was eating.

'You are out early, Laura,' she said, without opening her eyes. Laura laughed.

'They say the early bird catches the worm, Aunt Mabel,' she said, taking the other rocking-chair.

'That must depend upon the worm, of course. I mean, if it wants to get caught.'

Mrs. Naunton suddenly stopped rocking. She opened her eyes and looked at Laura. Then she shut them again and went on rocking. Laura tittered uncomfortably.

'The worm don't have a chance, Aunt Mabel. They just plain stupid.'

Mrs. Naunton lifted her hands from her lap and disclosed a paper bag full of peppermint candy with red and green decorations. She snapped off a section and passed it to Laura, and slipped a bit between her own pursed lips.

'Aunt Mabel,' said Laura, after a pause, 'you don't think it's time I put my hair up? I nearly sixteen now.'

Mrs. Naunton did not reply immediately, but she opened her eyes and looked over the tree-tops to the hills.

'I think your mother wore hers up by your age. Why don't you ask her?'

'I knew it, I knew it,' said Laura, bouncing in the chair.

'Why you want to get your hair up specially?'

'Well, I is grown up, Aunt Mabel. I just can't stay a child for ever.'

'No, that's true. But I suspect it's got something to do with that fuss at church yesterday? Eh?'

Mrs. Naunton looked at Laura with lustreless eyes.

'It don't got nothing to do with anything, at-all, at-all, Aunt Mabel. I had a bad spell. What so strange in that? And, Aunt Mabel, I do think that Parson shouldn't behave so. He got no right to rush off left and right with my private business. Aunt Mabel, you is more like my own mother than Mother is. Aunt Mabel, speak to Parson. Tell him he done wrong. He's—he's a parson!'

Mrs. Naunton put a hand on Laura's chair. It lay limp and white.

'That's for you or your own mother to do, Laura. But you are old enough to understand a few things now. You just said you want to get your hair up. Then behave like a woman, then. You don't really think a man, because he's a parson in holy orders,

any different to any man, Laura? And you can't expect it, either. You say I'm more like your mother?'

Mrs. Naunton took back her hand and laid it beside the other over the bag of candy in her lap.

'I'm not, I'm not,' she said, speaking with a touch of animation which roused Laura. 'I never will be, neither. But I will say this. I've known your mother long enough. We grew up together, though she was a little younger than me. But we grew up together. Then I met Naunton. I married him. I buried him and I bore a son and was alone with him.'

The spark of life faded from her face. Her fingers pushed candy between her lips and her teeth crunched it dutifully.

'Then Pettigrew came and she married him. Pettigrew was my overseer.'

Mrs. Naunton shut her eyes.

'Your overseer! Then you knew Father well, then, Aunt Mabel. Nobody never told me.'

'You sound surprised at that. Well! He was a poor white till I found him. He and his mother and sisters lived in a tumbledown shack at Borobridge. Your mother wouldn't have looked at him then. No, never, never. You don't know how terrible it is to be poor white.'

Mrs. Naunton rocked gently. Her fingers played upon her knees.

'I found him. I brought him here. I taught him manners. I gave him shelter and food and money. And position. And he was as handsome as God! Two years later—he married your mother.' She raised her palms and spoke slowly. 'He married—Laura Pouyatt. It was—it was a great shock to me. A terrible shock.'

'But I can't see why, Aunt Mabel. You expect a young man to marry. And he was handsome, too.'

'And what about me? He left me—alone. I trained him to look after this place. I needed an overseer. But Pettigrew didn't have everything.'

'Yes, Aunt Mabel.'

'No. His looks—his charm—couldn't compensate him for the things he lacked. He didn't know what gratitude was. He was weak. He was stupid. A weak and foolish man.'

Aunt Mabel had never stirred resentment in Laura before. They had always agreed over everything important. But this morning something had changed in Aunt Mabel. She was strange and animated—and, if that were possible, she was excited. Laura decided to go. She did not want to hear any more about her father, even though hatred of him had been instilled into her.

'I surprised to see Neil planting more bananas, Aunt Mabel. He lost a lot of money over them already with the last "breeze". Then there's the war. With one thing and another, suppose he can't find no market for them, Aunt Mabel?'

'Neil knows best what he is doing, Laura. I back him with everything. I shouldn't try to interfere, if I were you. Might as well go and tell your mother not to grow more cane or coffee. Even she's got some banana. That's no better risk. She'll soon go right over to banana too. You wait. That's where the money is.'

'But there's the disease! That's spreading.'

'Only in Portland. We can manage here.'

'Well, I must go, Aunt Mabel. You never hardly come down to Newbiggin these days. You is quite a stranger.'

Aunt Mabel smiled, and puckered her lips as she began to munch candy on her front teeth.

'One of these days, Laura. You know I'll always come, if I'm wanted. Always. But I can never get the time now—with Neil always wanting to trot off to Busha MacKenzie's.'

She leaned forward and whispered confidently.

'I think the daughter is the attraction. The eldest girl, Prudence. You should use her as a model, Laura. A nice Scottish girl with such breeding, and background too.'

'Miss Prim and Proper,' Laura muttered, and hacked her heel on the floor-boards.

'Your poor mother lost another calf, eh? That makes three now—or is it four?'

'You mean the calf dead, Aunt Mabel?'

'Yes, miss, I do. The neck broke. Like the other three or four. Most peculiar.'

Laura unhitched the bridle.

'I better go, Aunt Mabel. Maybe there is something I can do?'

'You better go, yes. But there isn't anything you can do. You can't splice a broken neck, Laura. When it's broke—it's broke.'

'I mean—find out if there's anything in what you suggest, Aunt Mabel? If it's just coincidence, or what?'

'I didn't "suggest", Laura. I said it's peculiar, and so it is. A fourth or maybe a fifth to die with a broken neck.'

'It's only the third,' Laura said miserably, getting into the saddle. She was not happy any more, but full of apprehension.

'I better go. Goodbye, Aunt Mabel. You must not be such a stranger to Newbiggin. You is always welcome.'

Mrs. Naunton raised her fingers a few inches and let them fall back to her lap. When Laura had ridden away, she heaved herself up on her hands and waddled to the railing. Here she leaned, and stared, without expression, at Laura's back.

'Perhaps,' she said to the hens pecking in the grass.

Laura brooded upon Mrs. Naunton's revelations. She felt that she had been told something unpleasant which remained just beyond her grasp. It perplexed and tormented her. She knew that with a little concentration she would discover exactly what Aunt Mabel had implied. But she did not want to know. She believed that the knowledge would in some way damage the relationship which had always existed between Mrs. Naunton and herself. She did not want to sever their precarious friendship. She relied too much on Mrs. Naunton for sympathy and affection. Her own mother, Laura thought bitterly, gave her little of either.

She guided the horse along the drive, under the branches of ramona and *lignum vitae* saplings and by massed colours of bougainvillea. It was dark and cool. Presently she joined the road. Laura halted and waited for the buggy to pass. She took no notice of the driver, but suddenly felt a great urge to talk with someone of her own age or her own station.

But her mother had made this impossible by quarrelling with the planters and condemning any relationship with the niggers. Laura realized that she must depend upon Neil. She would find him. He would reassure her.

Laura looked without understanding at the hand reaching towards her. Her eyes followed it along black jacket sleeves until she looked into the eyes of Parson Bickett. She saw the buggy in which he sat. She shook two damp fingers and wiped her hand on her skirt.

'Good morning, Miss Pettigrew,' Parson Bickett said, 'or, should I say, a rather hot morning. A rather hot morning indeed. I was just making my way to Newbiggin to inquire after your health, Miss Laura.'

'I want to thank you, Parson, for——'

He held up a plump hand.

'Not at all, Miss Pettigrew. I tried to do what I could under the circumstances. You were not well. But I need not have feared, I see. You look quite recovered, praise God.'

'Thank you, Parson. I am.'

'Yes, yes. Yes, I see. That is so. You've made a rapid recovery. Yesterday you had us fairly frightened.'

'Perhaps it's all best forgotten, Parson.'

Parson Bickett straightened his glasses with the heels of his hands.

'Yes, you know, Miss Laura, I cannot help feeling that somewhere yesterday I could have been of even greater assistance. That I failed when I was called upon to—your mother wanted my help, but in the action of the moment—well . . .'

He stopped and looked puzzled.

'Your mother is quite well herself today?'

'Quite well, thank you, Parson.'

'I am glad to hear that. She has worried me. I am glad that she is herself today. Yesterday I thought she seemed a trifle overwrought.'

Laura's nostrils dilated.

'I think you worrying too much over nothing, Parson. Yesterday is past. You don't want to let anything that happened then worry you too much. You want to put it out of your mind, Parson, behind you.'

Parson shook his checks.

'But you cannot mean that, Miss Pettigrew. You cannot comprehend what you ask. This is not something which can be treated lightly. We are talking of your mother and yourself, Miss Pettigrew. I don't think you understand.'

He shifted in his seat.

'Your mother is everything to our little kirk. I cannot recall a previous time that she has come to me for help. She is a self-sufficient person, Miss Laura. Yet she did come forward for my

help yesterday. I must give it, must do what I can to unburden her soul. It would be failing in my duty to her not to do so, neglecting my vocation.'

He took off his glasses, blew on them and put them on again.

'You acting like you was a Roman, Parson, and you was in the confession-box.'

Laura spoke angrily.

'I am no Roman Catholic priest. That is true. But I am a priest, of the Church of Scotland. And who can one confide in, if not in a priest of the Church? Where else could you get better guidance?'

Laura moved her horse closer to Parson's buggy. She bent across him and took the reins from his hands. He did not attempt to resist as her smell invaded his nostrils.

'You cause me to say a lot, Parson, perhaps better left unsaid. But you listen to me. You let my mother keep the burden you say she got on her soul. It got nothing to do with you. Nothing at all. I heard all about you. You listen to our confession then you run off and spread it about. My mother don't know yet what I do—that you been chatting her private business over Busha MacKenzie dinner table.'

'No, no, no!'

'Oh, yes. That's true enough. I am a Jamaican. You is a Scot. Keep out of our private business. We meet occasionally. Very well. But don't try to scandalize us. My mother wouldn't like that if she got to hear——'

'There's been some misrepresentation.'

'None of that. If you want to continue owing my mother the debt of gratitude you always talking about, you can let matters lie the way they is, now. This don't concern you, or the Kirk nor nobody.'

'This is inexplicable. I only mentioned that you were unwell—I had no intention of suggesting anything else.'

'Just the same, Parson, like I said. You can just put it out of your mind.'

Laura threw down the reins and Parson hastily caught them. He fidgeted and smiled. Since yesterday he had noticed that she had grown up. She was a handsome young woman with that scowl on her face. Last night he had had a quite wonderful dream

about her, but it would be quite madness, completely out of the question, to think of an alliance between them.

He coughed and looked away.

'If I was certain that it was only a domestic matter—purely——'

'It is!'

'You sound certain, Miss Laura.'

Parson dragged out his handkerchief and rubbed his face and neck and hands.

'I should not like your mother to think . . . It is unthinkable.' Parson twisted his body. He wanted to escape and yet to remain where he was.

'If you really believe that I——'

'Yes.'

He was experiencing too much pleasure to deny himself satisfaction. He wanted to delight Laura. The girl had spirit.

'Perhaps it is God's will that we met here prematurely. I was on my way to Newbiggin. Now I must go. This was indeed fortunate. But I have work to do today. A marriage of two souls to unite in Holy Matrimony after years of sinning, christening their children, and a funeral at four.'

'You got a busy day, Parson.'

'Full. Full and satisfying, Miss Laura. Life, marriage and death. The complete circle.'

Laura smiled. He lifted his hat from the groove round his head and quickly shook Laura's hand.

'My very best regards to Mrs. Pettigrew. And—no more fainting spells, Miss Laura.' He shook a finger playfully at her and his buggy creaked away. A wheel was swinging loose, but Parson did not know that. As he went slowly along he tried to fight the desire to turn round and look once more at Laura. He knew that she had not moved. He licked his lips nervously and found himself leaning over the side of the buggy, repeatedly lifting his hat.

Laura did not acknowledge his greeting.

'Get along, Bathsheba,' he said loudly.

But Bathsheba was accustomed to a slow walk with perhaps an occasional trot and did not increase her pace noticeably.

Parson twisted slowly round until he could see Laura through the rear slat. She sat arrogantly on her horse, with a hand on her

hip. And she watched him as though he were a spider on the wall.

His flush of desperate longing astonished him. Suddenly he heard Laura laugh. Her laughter had the true ring of a bell and it carried far. It shamed and confused him. He dropped a hand to his pocket and was reassured by the bulk of his Bible.

'Get thee behind me, Satan!' he prayed with open eyes. He would redeem her soul, for such beauty must come from the devil. With this thought he urged Bathsheba to a trot.

Laura found it the most natural thing that this power over Parson should be hers. She knew this was so, though he made no appeal to her. In fact, she found his flesh and manner repulsive. She wanted to hurt him and watch him wriggle. She tried to think of hungering after Parson the way she hungered after Neil. The idea was so ridiculous that she shouted with laughter and laughed even louder when Parson trotted away.

She put a finger to her lips and stopped laughing as she thought of telling Neil. He would be furious to think that Parson had insulted her with his thoughts. But would he be jealous? Did he love her sufficiently? After seeing to the dead calf at Water Bottom she would find Neil and sacrifice Parson upon the altar of Neil's pride.

Laura found the dead calf in the middle of a crowd of men. They squatted on their heels, looking like amiable vultures. They saw her and slouched to their feet. Their conversation stopped, and in the uncomfortable silence they inspected the ground where flies hummed over cow dung.

Laura looked from the men to the calf. She was suddenly angry at their indifference. The calf had been deliberately killed and these men had done it.

'The poor thing!' she said.

They looked up, shocked.

'It's no' only a cow calf, Miss Laura,' a man said.

'And it had a right to live, not to get its neck stretched.'

'They don't feel nothing, Miss Laura,' said Abimalek.

She jerked sideways.

'How you know, Abimalek? You don't know. You never got your neck stretched yet? How you to tell if a cow calf don't feel nothing? And this is the third, the third one to go this way.'

The men shifted their feet, and Zaccariah began to retreat.

'Where you going to, Zaccariah?'

'Nowhere, Miss Laura.'

'Abimalek, when the calf died?'

The men shrugged their shoulders and pouted their lips.

'Me don't know, Miss Laura.'

'Who know? Somebody must. Zaccariah, why you run 'way just now? You know something, Zaccariah?'

Zaccariah stretched his neck.

'Me don't know nothing, Miss Laura. Me don't running away.'

'The cow calf don't born with the neck broke?'

'Yes'm,' they replied.

Their collective answer was too ready. It convinced Laura that they were all lying. This was, after all, the third occurrence. It could not be coincidence.

'Who stayed with the calf last night?' she asked.

The men looked at Abimalek. He attacked a tuft of grass with his big toe and uprooted it.

'Tell me what you know, Abimalek.'

'I don't know nothing, Miss Laura. I just fall fast asleep. A man can't stay awake all night with him eye open. I just shet my eye and fall fast asleep. When I open my eye, Miss Laura, I just see it a lie down there, stone cold dead. Stone cold dead!'

'Aah!' said the men.

'Laura,' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

Laura twisted round in the saddle.

'Mother!' said Laura. She felt tired.

'Dig a hole and put the animal in,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. 'Dead carcass is carrion, Levi; see it gets done. Who got a cow calf to take off the milk?'

'Busha MacKenzie, mistress,' said Levi, who had followed her from Newbiggin.

Mrs. Pettigrew was impatient with him and he added hastily: 'Joe Brown got a good cow calf, mistress.'

'Good. What the mother die of?'

'Sunstroke, mistress.'

'Aah! Then it will do. And Levi, the next cow calving drive it into Newbiggin grounds. We don't want no more accidents. You understand me? No more.'

'Yes, mistress.'

'Come along, Laura.'

The mistress and her daughter rode away together.

'Don't you ever let me hear you haranguing the labourers again—if you hope to keep their respect and keep them in their proper place. You ought to know that you won't get nothing but lies out of them if you question them, Laura. You'll only drive them dangerous and sullen. And when it comes to temper, Laura, you don't got nothing to touch theirs. You know that. You should thank God I come when I did.'

Laura was angry and humiliated.

'Now go home. Weigh out a pound of rice for the dills and a basinful of corn for the hens. I didn't have time to do it before I come out. But before you do that, make yourself tidy.'

Mrs. Pettigrew looked fully into Laura's eyes.

'You are a disgrace to me,' she said, riding away to appropriate Joe Brown's cow calf.

Chapter Six

Laura stopped where she was to tidy herself. As her anger died her resentment against her mother grew and filled her mind. She determined upon defiance. Today she did not need the promptings of Mrs. Naunton to tell her how to achieve this. It was clear to Laura for the first time what she must do if she hoped to gain the freedom of maturity. More than ever it was necessary for Neil to see her as an adult.

Abruptly she kicked the horse and turned its head away from Newbiggin lands. Someone else could measure the grain for the dills.

She saw a man running towards her and recognized him. He was one of Neil's niggers. The man swung into the roadside and waited for her to pass. He was trying to suppress his laughter out of respect for her, and to this end he clamped his face into a hand.

Laura stopped near him. He greeted her soberly.

Laura did not return his greeting, so he hawked and spat carefully behind his foot.

'You know where Mass Neil is?' she asked.

'Yes'm, yes'm,' he said. 'Him down—him a—him down——'
Laughter spattered from his lips. He shut his mouth and his eyes began to water.

'Well?'

'Him, him a-beat up—Lawd me God—oh!' He could not stop laughing. Laura flicked the tip of her switch against his neck. His laughing stopped and his hand jerked up with his cutlass towards his shoulder. But it stopped there.

'When I ask a question, answer.'

'Yes'm. Yes, Mistress Ma'am. Mass Neil down a Duck Pond, ma'am.'

Laura waited.

'Him a give Sammy Johnson a beating, mistress.'

The man rubbed the weal on his neck, hating her.

His news excited Laura. She had watched Neil punishing many an offender. He was godly as he meted out the blows. They fell like doom. Soon the man on the ground was blood-washed and his rags clotted in his wounds. If he fainted he was thrown into the pond. At no time was Neil so esteemed by everyone as then. His beatings were famous, and they helped to keep the prison empty and the land farmed. It was certain that there would be an amphitheatre of spectators encouraging Neil and shouting derision at Sammy Johnson.

Laura knew Sammy Johnson. He was incurably a thief, but as he was also afraid of going to the penitentiary he always took his punishment with a kind of humble gratitude.

Laura rode quickly. As she approached Duck Pond she could hear the blows, Sammy's screams and the babble of the spectators. She urged the horse through the undergrowth, sometimes lying on its neck to clear a branch. It was dank and dark under the trees. The ground was soft, and there was the smell of stagnant water. Laura glimpsed the pond. It was slimy green and grass glided over its surface. The noise was immediately to her right. She trembled as she jumped to the ground and hitched the horse to a branch.

For a while she stood hidden behind thick shrubs. It was a good beating. She could almost feel the blows. Laura winced as they fell. Sammy Johnson writhed impotently to evade them, for his arms and legs were secured by stout bands of banana trash.

The bystanders flung taunts at Sammy which he could not hear. He rolled and twisted and the people laughed. He flung up his head to scream at Neil.

'I won't thief again, massa. Save me! Save me!'

Neil brought the whip across his face. The man's lips seemed to burst. Blood poured out.

Laura looked proudly at Neil. His back was bare. It was broad and strong, and it was oiled with sweat.

'You say that every time. Every time you say that. Today you steal twenty coconut. Last month you took a dozen. Took a dozen. The time before, Sammy, you helped yourself because you thirsty. Who you think you is, Samuel Johnson? You don't own my property, you black thief. Next time you try it, I will kill you. Do you hear? I will kill you.'

'Help me, oh, God, oh!' screamed the man. 'I won't do it again, sah!'

'Give him one for me too, the thief,' Laura shouted, running into the clearing. She was thumping a fist into her hand.

Neil looked round. It was a moment before he was fully conscious of her presence.

'Last week he took a bag of minty coco off Newbiggin. He didn't get enough beating. Not near enough.'

The man was sobbing into his shoulder as Neil turned back to him.

'You hear that, Sammy? The mistress didn't beat you enough, you come steal my coconut too. I got to give you some real punishment, Sammy, so you learn sense.'

'That's right. Or next time he can go off with the P.C. to the gaolhouse.'

She was too excited to stand. She saw a sack of coconuts and sat on them. They were the evidence.

The spectators were silent.

'This time you will learn,' said Neil, bringing down the whip again. Sammy's body went limp and his head rolled into a rut.

'Him dead, sah!' the spectators whispered. They lifted awed faces to Neil.

Neil blinked at the man. He shifted the whip and jabbed Sammy's chest. He heard a twig snap.

'No, no. He can't dead? I hardly beat him at all—at all. You all see.'

He turned to Laura.

'Laura, you saw, didn't you? You don't see me beat him up? I didn't hardly touch him.'

He dropped the whip and rubbed his belly. It ached.

'Put his head in the water,' said Laura.

'Yes. Put his head in the water. He just fainted, that's all. He did that last time—twice last time.'

The men dragged him to the pond and pushed his head beneath the slime. His head came up and he gazed cautiously around, seeking a means of escape. But his guards saw him.

'Him don't dead, Mass Neil,' they shouted.

Neil marched up to him and kicked him several times in the groin.

Sammy Johnson moaned and fainted again. He was soon revived. He lay twitching between his guards on the ground. He stank of blood and sweat and filth, and all that he knew was the heat of pain in his body. Nothing else mattered, not even the flies which crawled in the gash on his lips.

Neil was finished. He dried his body and put on his jacket.

'Turn him over so he can see me,' Neil said. He combed his hair and his moustache. Then he put his hand in his pocket. When it came out he held a shilling between his fingers.

'Here, Sammy,' he said, flicking the coin towards him. 'Get yourself a drink. I don't mean you no harm, you old fool.'

A murmur of envy rose from the spectators and died away. Sammy tried to part his lips in a smile. But they had jelliced together.

'You don't got a word of thanks?' asked Neil. He tickled Sammy's lips with the toe of his boot.

As the blood started again, Neil shrugged his shoulders and went to Laura. His shoulders heaved and fell elaborately with the swing of his arms. He was pleased with this final gesture. It had been an inspiration. He could not think of one other person he knew doing anything similar. It was unique. After this everybody would be talking about it. A shilling was a fortune to Sammy Johnson.

Neil put a cigarette to his lips and saw his hand. There was blood on it.

'Oh, f—k it!' he said. 'I got that bloody nigger's black blood on me.'

He looked round, but the others had gone.

'I just can't never stand the feel of blood on me. I can't bear to see it. It turns me up.'

'I'll wipe it away,' Laura said. She was pale.

'No. Yes. You do it, Laura.'

While he gazed glassily over her head she cleaned it away.

'You always hated to get blood on yourself, Neil.'

'Take the kerchief home and burn it,' he said angrily.

'No. It will wash.'

'Burn it, I say. You can't never wash out blood. You'll leave something. I don't want the smell of nigger on me. Sometimes I'm afraid I will get their blood on me—that it will go down my veins and spoil me. You know what my great-grandfather would do, Laura? He would kill Sammy Johnson for this.'

'Don't think no more about it,' Laura said.

'Lord, Laura! I am tired to death.'

She stroked his forehead.

'Your head aching?'

'Going off now,' he said.

'Good. I come for a serious talk with you, Neil.'

'What you think of it, eh? What I did?'

'You always was the best man I know for beating a nigger. Even my mother can't do it like you.'

'I know that,' he said irritably. 'I don't mean that. I mean—well, I mean dropping him that shilling. Just think. Sammy can stand me a drink tonight. Do you know I have a good mind go down the bar tonight get Sammy buy me a drink! My God, I will!'

He laughed and ran his forefinger backwards and forwards under his moustache.

'Neil,' Laura said, 'there never was no one like you!'

'But don't you think it was a neat little trick? The surprise! You saw his face? Lord, what will people say?'

'You is a very clever man.'

'You don't think so too? Oh, Laura, you'll make me conceited. I got to watch myself, or, by God, you all will.'

'You smell so nice, Neil.'

He pushed her from him and began pacing up and down beside the pond.

'I don't know how much I beat him. I forget. You know, you forget. You just get to thinking and you still doing it—slap, slap, slap. That Sammy Johnson strong. And believe me, Laura, it takes strength to meet strength and faint him twice.'

He flexed an arm muscle under his hand and shook his fist.

'You is as strong as a horse, Neil. A "big" man, all over.'

He looked away from her and seemed undecided about something. Finally, he said: 'You is no fool, Laura. At all—at all.'

'I wanted to have a talk with you, Neil,' Laura said.

He took her arm and led her under the trees. His horse was hitched near by. They sat together on an old log, and Neil turned to her.

'I don't kiss you yet, this morning,' he said. 'I can't think what come over me.'

He pulled her close and kissed her. His eyelids grew heavy and he breathed deeply.

'I needed that, Laura.'

'Any time's the right time for you,' said Laura. 'All I want now is a talk with you.'

He rubbed his nose against her neck.

'Well, hurry up, then,' he said.

'When you coming to speak with Mother?'

'What about?'

'About us, of course.'

'What about us?'

'Our marriage. Don't be so dumb.'

Neil sat upright.

'What's this? You're not on about that again, are you?'

'Don't sound so cross, Neil. You know you must marry me in the long run? You can speak to her, can't you? Perhaps she will treat me like a normal human being then. She likes you.'

'I think I can see at last, Laura. What you really want is to get away from your mother, Laura. But, you stop to think. You don't know that anybody marry you marry her as well? I quite understand how you feel, Laura, but I can't let you trap me into this.'

'That's not true. It's not a trap.'

'Oh, yes, you is. You inveigle me to go and sleep with you. Lead me on. Oh, I see it all now.'

'That's a lie! I didn't do a thing.'

'What matter now who did, Laura? The result is the same. For you. You think perhaps you can trap me that way. But you won't, Laura. I like to make up my own mind for myself. Nobody—not you—can force me to tie myself for the rest of my days, just so you can get out of your mother's clutches. You got what you asked for. Why can't that satisfy you?'

Laura slapped his face with all the strength she had. He caught her wrist and held it.

'I never believed that you would ever speak to me like that, Neil. I hate you. I don't want never to see you again.'

'Not never again?' he laughed, no longer angry.

'Never!'

'Come here to me. Take and be grateful.'

He struggled with her. It was not difficult to reach her lips. Presently she was quiet.

'My girl,' he whispered.

'Aunt Mabel says you love that Prudence MacKenzie. You always running off up there.'

There was a pause, and Neil chuckled.

'Getting jealous?'

'You would like me to be,' she said.

'Well, she can't take a candle to you, anyway. I don't want to do things to her—like this.'

There was another pause.

'She's bound to be a virgin too,' he muttered into her hair.

'Then you want her?'

'Pshaw! I don't go to see her. MacKenzie always picking my brains. He ought to pay me for the free advice I give him. I would be a rich man.'

'You'd rather marry me than her any day, wouldn't you?'

'You is such a child, Laura.'

'I will grow older.'

'I am so dog tired I can't hardly hold myself up. That Sammy Johnson took it out of me.'

'And you'll speak to Mother soon?'

'I feel like I could sleep for a whole year.'

'You'll come tonight?'

'I feel like it was me, not him, took a beating.'

'You not listening to a word I say, Neil. Not a word.'

He stood up.

'I don't deaf. You don't deaf, neither. I told you your answer before, so stop pestering me. It's only because I so dog tired that I don't give you what you really come for.'

Laura walked past him to find her horse. Twigs tore at her hair and scratched her face. She did not feel them. She brushed past a woman with a bunch of bananas on her head. The woman stood still until Laura passed, then she followed her. She watched Laura fling herself across the horse and waited until they crashed through the undergrowth and galloped along the road to Newbiggin.

The woman turned back to Duck Pond, scenting news for Chi-ju-ju. She saw Neil almost at once. He leaned against his horse gazing at the morass on the pond. He was rubbing one cheek slowly. Presently his foot reached for the stirrup. As he swung the horse round the woman cringed behind the cocoa leaves. His face was angry and one cheek was red. In a moment he was gone.

When she could no longer hear his horse, she ran out beside the pond. She saw the sack of coconuts. Hastily she looked around. There was no one. She folded back her skirt and filled it with as many coconuts as it would hold. Then, loping and walking, she disappeared in the other direction.



During the next few days Laura did not leave Newbiggin land. Neither did she remain in the house. The servants noticed her wandering in and out of the banana walk and around the house. She seemed restless and watchful.

One morning Sarah, who was returning through the banana walk from the spring with a bucket of drinking water, found her lying on her face in some trash. Laura was slapping the ground with her palms. Sarah put down the bucket of water and went to her.

'You sick, Miss Laur'?' she asked.

'Go away,' said Laura. She flung a handful of moist earth at Sarah. It missed her, but scattered over the bucket of water.

Sarah shrugged. She pushed over the bucket with her toes and the water bubbled into the soil.

That morning Samson stole a plump pigeon from the Chinaman and took it home for his dinner. Sarah took it and stuffed it with herbs. She fried it in deep fat in a Dutch pot. She was deeply content. Miss Laura like pigeons that way. Sarah presented it to Laura. The pigeon was brown and crisp. Mrs. Pettigrew reached across the table and took the bird on her plate. Without a word, she snapped off a wing and began to chew it.

Sarah retreated to the kitchen. Lucy was scraping a breadfruit. She kicked Lucy and took away the breadfruit.

'Lawd, Miss Sarah!' said Lucy.

'I don't ask you do nothing,' Sarah said.

'Jesus!' said Lucy.

Not long after they saw Laura. She ran out on to the veranda by the kitchen door. Suddenly she stopped. Her face was white. She turned quickly back to the house. In a few moments they saw her rushing past the turkey pen into the banana walk.

'What wrong?' asked Ellen.

'She must see one ghost, man,' said Lucy.

They rushed to the door and looked with apprehension at the ground and the sunshine and the blue sky.

'Me don't see nothin',' said Ellen.

'Me neither,' said Berta.

'It must be gone,' said Lucy.

'You talk nonsense,' said Sarah. 'White people don't never see ghost.'

'Anyway, you look, though, Miss Sarah,' said Lucy.

'Mind you' business,' Sarah said.

'I hear Busha car,' said Lucy.

'You hear that every day, Lucy.'

'Well, per'aps that's what frighten Miss Laura,' said Lucy.

'Pshaw!' said Sarah, drooping her lower lip.

But Lucy was right. It seemed to Laura that wherever she went, and at every hour, she could hear Busha MacKenzie's car. It panted its way even into her dreams, coming nearer and nearer until it loomed above her. Its lamps leered at her like eyes, and just before it would run her down she screamed and woke up, wet with sweat, to hear her mother moving about in the adjoining room. Tonight, like last night and the night before, she knew that the dream would come again and that when she awoke she

would hear her mother's feet drop to the floor and begin their stealthy meanderings.

Laura had no news of Neil. She had not seen him riding the road to Prudence MacKenzie. But she realized that this did not necessarily mean that he had not done so. She was certain that only illness would keep him away from her. From waiting passively for him to come to her, she began to scheme to see him again. She made and discarded plan after plan. One thing she knew was certain, and she trembled at the thought. When he came again to her she would surrender herself.

She was sitting on the ground behind the coach-house. She rolled a mint leaf to and fro between her fingers. The smell, so clean and fresh, seemed to burst around her. She heard Samson lead in her mother's horse. He unharnessed it, threw the saddle on a pile of blankets and turned the horse loose. He was grumbling to himself.

She jumped up, determined to lay her pride aside.

'Samson!' she called.

He ambled round the building before he replied.

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura could not frame the question.

'Samson—how old you is, Samson?' she asked. She turned her back on him and stared at the road.

'Lawd, Miss Laura!' Samson said. He slapped his thigh and paused.

'Me don't know, Ma'am.'

'Well, who you older than?'

'Me remember so long, Miss Laura.' He ran a finger round his nostrils before continuing. 'Me older than Mistress—'

'Look down the road, Samson. That's not Mass Neil?'

'No, Miss Laura. You eye bad. That no Busha MacKenzie. Mass Neil sick.'

'Sick?' Laura whispered. She turned with open lips to look at Samson.

'So me hear, Miss Laur'. Me don't know.'

'Saddle up a horse, Samson.'

In a few minutes she was galloping out of Newbiggin. Samson stopped to watch her flogging the horse. He shook his head and returned to the coach-house for a nap on the horse blankets.

As Laura rode along she left a trail of white dust. Every muscle was concerned with getting as quickly as possible to Neil's bedside. She was so happy to know that his absence from Newbiggin was due to sickness that she was overcome with nausea. The fields and the road came and went, and Laura's horse galloped between the poinsettia trees that marked the entrance to Neil's house.

Both the horse and herself were panting. When she dropped from the saddle her knees bent. In a moment she would be with Neil. Laura looked at the veranda and saw, almost with surprise, that Mrs. Naunton was silently watching her.

'Aunt Mabel!' she gasped.

Mrs. Naunton lifted her eyebrows and looked at the animal. It was sweating.

'How you can ride a poor animal like that, Laura, I cannot say. Look at it. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you bursting through those bushes, Laura.'

'Aunt Mabel, don't look so cross. You see——'

'You going to make excuses, miss. That's always the case. The weak ones will always find ways and means to cover their mistakes.'

'Aunt Mabel, don't take on so. You know——'

'I know only one thing, Laura. No beast should be ridden like this poor one has. They do good service, Laura. They deserve some consideration. I always told you, Laura. There's only one excuse for doing a thing like this.'

'“In sickness and in death.”'

'You used the very words. In sickness and in death. There's time enough.'

Laura paused, uncertain whether to sit down or not.

'Then I got an excuse, Aunt Mabel,' she said at last, speaking quickly.

'Oh?'

'I hear—somebody say—you got—sickness——'

'Sickness!'

Aunt Mabel laughed.

'Look at me, Laura. I never feel better in my life.'

'I didn't mean you. . . .'

Mrs. Naunton's fingers clawed in her lap. They found some crochet-work and became busy. She stared at the massing clouds.

'Aunt Mabel . . .' said Laura. She was embarrassed with shyness. 'Aunt Mabel, tell me if anybody sick. Anybody at all.'

She slipped to her knees and put a hand on Mrs. Naunton's arm. Mrs. Naunton lifted her crochet to scrutinize it and Laura's hand fell away.

'You expect to find someone sick, then, Laura?'

She dropped her work and turned to Laura. Laura sat back on her heels at the anger in Mrs. Naunton's eyes.

'Nobody sick. Nobody. There was no call to come galloping off up here. There's nothing and nobody for you to get worked up about. Except this.'

She tapped her lips with a finger and her nostrils dilated.

'Did you slap Neil's face, Laura? I know it's you, otherwise, of course, I wouldn't put it to you. He wouldn't take that from anyone—anyone. He wouldn't tell me it's you.'

Aunt Mabel——'

'No, no. Listen to me, Laura. I want you to promise me you will never—will never do that to my son again, to Neil again. I want you to promise me——'

'I promise. Yes, Aunt Mabel. I won't never again. I promise.'

'Ah!' said Aunt Mabel. She stood up and went to the rail. The things in her lap scattered over the floor. Laura crawled about and collected them.

She saw that Mrs. Naunton was finishing a communion bag. She placed the things together on the floor and waited.

'I wasn't sure. Not quite sure,' said Aunt Mabel. She hammered timidly with her fists at a post.

'You shouldn't have done that, Laura. No. Not you—nor nobody. You know in all his born days I never hit him once. Never. It would hurt his pride so. He's so proud, Laura.'

'I'm sorry, Aunt Mabel.'

'Sorry! Trust a Pettigrew to say that. I thought you were different from your mother, Laura. Seems I am wrong. You just take what you want and get away with it.'

'Never, Aunt Mabel. You learned me to be different, more like you. You been a good mother to me—my only friend——'

'He's not for you, Laura. Don't listen to nothing he says.'

She was crying as she stared over the hills.

'I got plans for Neil. He'll be big one day. A big man. He's

going to expand, experiment, make a name for himself. He got to choose the right one to rise with him. One day, he'll be rich when you all else is still scrabbling about for pennies.'

'You don't mean what you saying,' Laura said in distress.

Mrs. Naunton held Laura's shoulder. Her grasp was hard.

'You in love with Neil. Oh, I watched it growing. You think he loves you too. But that's wrong. I got plans for him. He'll be big one day. A big man with responsibilities.'

She laughed into her hand. 'You like all the rest of the girls. They all love him. It's enough to turn his head. And he's so big and so handsome. And then you go and box him so you hurt his pride and he got to hide away.'

'Aunt Mabel, this last week I don't understand nothing. I know I done something to hurt you, for you seem so angry with me. But I don't know what it is.'

Laura rubbed her palms together.

'You always said I was more you child than hers. I thought you always expected I——'

'Look at the crochet bag!' said Aunt Mabel. She returned to her chair, seated herself and handed the crochet-work to Laura. Laura held it but looked at Aunt Mabel.

'For Prudence.'

The bag fell from Laura's hand and landed on Mrs. Naunton's lap.

'I discover the dear girl didn't have a communion bag. So I'm making her one to carry a slice of cake of a Sunday.'

She found the needle and began to work again.

'So your mother took poor Brown's calf away from him!'

Laura felt numb.

'That's characteristic, of course.'

'It's Prudence, then, Aunt Mabel?'

'You always got to remember a person's pride. He got a temper. Hot—like his father's was.'

'Brown's calf, Aunt Mabel?'

'You got to rise—rise.'

'I better leave you to your work, Aunt Mabel.'

'Sit down, Laura. Turn out that cat and sit on the chair.'

'Goodbye, Aunt Mabel.'

'How is your mother, Laura? I never see her now, do I?'

'You should visit Newbiggin,' said Laura. But she was almost choking.

'By and by. Perhaps one day on my way up to——'

'MacKenzie's. I know. I must go before those clouds burst.'

Laura hurried down the steps.

'Come again, Laura,' said Aunt Mabel.

Raindrops were falling here and there. The near clouds were black, but far away where they joined the sky they were a deep rose.

Laura raced away from Mrs. Naunton. She lashed the horse and stood in the stirrups. Nothing mattered but the rain beating on her. It cooled her face, which felt hot and stiff. Her tears broke free and merged with the raindrops.

Then Laura slumped in the saddle and wept, wildly, knowing that the support of childhood was gone for ever. Now she could rely upon no one but herself. She wanted independence from her mother and was equally certain that it was impossible.

'God, I hate her! Let her die and leave me alone,' she said. The prayer shocked her so that she was afraid. She sagged over the horse's neck.

The horse walked into the courtyard. The servant women ran out to help her. She pushed them gently away and trailed her skirt through the mud into the house. At once she knew that the house was empty of her mother. It was cool and peaceful.

The servant women clustered together and wondered. Each sighed in turn, then all sighed together.

'You think . . .' Lucy said.

'Shut your mouth,' said Sarah.

The women sat down in the kitchen and sighed again.

Sarah fetched a dry coconut from a sack. She stabbed the eyes with a nail and sucked the water greedily. The women swallowed and scraped their throats.

Sarah cracked the coconut shell on the floor. She separated the pieces and eased the meat from the shell with a knife. Then she reached down a tin of wet sugar and placed a blob of it on three pieces of coconut. These she handed to the women grudgingly. The biggest piece she kept for herself. She heaped it with sugar and took a bite.

'Bad,' she said.

The women all sighed again.

Lucy eased out a dead wasp from the sugar. She found the wings and half the body.

'You think . . . ' said Lucy.

'Me say, shut up you mouth, Lucy,' Sarah said.

'Yes, Miss Sarah.'

There was a patch of wet on the floor by the door where the rain blew in.

'You know what me hear?' said Lucy eagerly. 'They say like mistress like——'

'Me tell you shut up you mouth, Lucy,' said Sarah, hitting Lucy with her elbow. Lucy rolled off the mortar and the others laughed.

Samson put his head inside the door. His tongue licked between his lips. He looked like a dog waiting to be patted. They ignored him. He ventured one foot into the kitchen.

'Got out me kitchen, old man,' said Sarah.

'I was just wondering, Miss Sarah, if you got another little piece of coconut and wet sugar.'

'I don't got nothing for you, Samson. Clear out; I got other things on my mind right now.'

'That so, Miss Sarah?'

'You don't think . . . ' said Lucy.

'Stop thinking, Lucy, or so help me I gwine lick you down.'

'Well, she sick. You no see how she sick. Beside, me know something.'

'She sick?' said Samson. His lips hung loose and his eyes protruded.

'What else?' said Lucy defiantly.

'Lord me—God—oh!' Samson said. He ran off through the rain.

'What wrong with him?' said Lucy.

'Mad, mad, man,' Sarah said.

'Woman want man, man,' Lucy said. And Sarah slapped her.

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Chapter Seven

The letter was dirty. It was written on a sheet of graph paper ripped from an exercise book. There was no envelope. Mrs. Pettigrew sniffed as she held it by the tips of her fingers. It was, she thought, exactly like the sender, dirty and sloven. It was liberally spattered with ink, and the writing toppled backwards.

She let it float to the ground and her boot came over it for a moment and ground it. She said nothing, but helped herself to more stewed goat.

Sarah stood behind the mistress's chair. She clasped her hands over her waist, waiting to be dismissed.

Mrs. Pettigrew loaded her mouth. Then as she chewed she stared at the wall with dull eyes. She put the letter from her mind. Instead, she covertly watched Laura fighting nausea. Although she expected something, these first signs of Laura's trouble shocked her.

'The boy waiting, mistress,' Sarah said.

She stopped chewing to reply.

'Send him away. More mutton, Laura?'

'I hate goat mutton, Mother. It's too rank.'

'It's good body-building meat. Sarah, fetch me a red pepper. This meat got no life in it.'

Sarah brought the pepper.

'The boy won't go, mistress. Say Miss Prue expecting a answer.'

Mrs. Pettigrew knocked a spoonful of rice to her plate.

'There's no answer. What she think I am? Send him away.'

'Yes, mistress.'

Laura eased her serviette to the floor, and bent to recover it. She found the letter and pushed it into her boot.

'Can I leave the table, Mother? I feel sick.'

Mrs. Pettigrew shrugged and continued chewing. But her cheeks were red.

Laura went to her room and lay on the bed until the sickness passed and her mouth stopped springing water. She smoothed out the letter and read.

'Dear Cousin Laura,

'Hoping this finds you in the very best of health as it leaves me at present and that all is going well with you and yours at Newbiggin as I cannot say it is going with us here at all. Poor Matt fell off the roof when he was fixing some shingles and got laid up in bed, he hit his head, so there is no money coming in, times is hard for everyone as I know you know. But what to do and if I did not know I could call on you I would be in a big difficulty, I don't know what I would do. But trust in God. He will provide. It was all his fault really but he will soon working again and I would not asking you if I did not know you would help though I know we owe you a little something from the last time. I will send it soon ever as Matt working again just to carry on with. The boy is honest, he is Dorcas boy, he won't steal nothing. Give my true love to Laura and yourself and trust in God.

'Your dear cousin,
'Prunella Burton.'

Laura crumpled the letter. When she shut her eyes she could hear the words whining in Aunt Prue's voice. Almost she expected to see her.

Presently she returned to the table. She opened her hand and dropped the note on the floor. Mrs. Pettigrew was finishing her meal. She pointed a fork at Laura.

'She'll be standing at the gate watching the road,' she said, 'waiting for Dorcas's boy to come with a two-shilling bit, or a bag of old clothes.'

She gave a quick laugh.

'The fool! She would a done better to stay here mending the sheets. You say you is grown-up now. Well, you can take a leaf out of Prunella's book. All she wanted was a man—any man.'

She poured a glass of water down her throat and wiped her lips.

'The way Prunella tried for a man it was painful to watch. When Matt came along she thought he was the Apostle. She don't even get a pickney out of it. Don't play with your food, Laura. You looking thin and you got life to feed.'

She got up from the table.

'Sarah!' she called, and strode past Laura towards the drawing-room.

'Mistress.'

'Tell Samson bring my horse round.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

Sarah hurried away.

'You didn't vomit, then?' she asked Laura.

Laura shook her head.

'I thought I didn't hear you vomiting. But you quick. You is very quick. Real quick. You still won't say nothing?'

Laura did not reply.

'You fool!' said Mrs. Pettigrew, striding away.

Laura did not look up.

* * *

That night she dreamt of Busha MacKenzie's car. The headlamps shone in her eyes. She opened her mouth to scream. Her eyes came open and she was awake. She saw her mother standing in the doorway, holding a lamp between her hands. Mrs. Pettigrew was motionless. Her eyes did not waver, yet they came closer until she stood over Laura. She held out a palm. On it lay the sapphire brooch.

'Tell me. Tell me,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. Her voice was harsh. She leaned across Laura and pressed her palm over Laura's mouth. The brooch bruised her lips.

Laura twisted her head from under Mrs. Pettigrew's fever-hot hands. She watched her mother's eyes glinting in the lamplight. On the wall, Mrs. Pettigrew's shadow danced to the rattle of the lamp globe.

'Tell me. Tell me,' repeated Mrs. Pettigrew. She clutched the lamp. She began to tremble with ague and her shadow leapt and surged on the wall.

'Very well,' she said. 'You determined not to speak.'

Laura closed her eyes and turned her face to the wall. She heard Mrs. Pettigrew shuffle away on heavy feet, and knew that her mother was in a fever.

She lay in the darkness for a long time listening to her mother. Mrs. Pettigrew was very restless. The following night Laura went early to bed. She was very tired and knew that she would sleep.

It was at the hour when the darkness was thickest that she jerked awake. For a few moments she lay quietly, listening to the

night sounds. She heard a dog whining. She was afraid to move, for no conscious reason. Presently she became aware of a glow through her eyelids. Laura opened her eyes.

In the doorway Mrs. Pettigrew stood motionless. She held a lamp in both hands. As soon as she saw the gleam of Laura's eyes she blew on the light and disappeared. Laura's hands tightened round her own neck and she choked.

The next night Laura went late to bed. She pulled the sheet over her head and lay like a corpse underneath, waiting. But she fell asleep. Then she heard a thud. It was followed by the slapping of slippers on the floor. They approached leisurely. The door opened and through the sheet Laura saw Mrs. Pettigrew enter. Tonight she carried a candle in a dirty brass stick. Mrs. Pettigrew advanced to the bed and stood looking at the body beneath the sheet. She caught the plait over her breast and threw it to its partner at her back.

Then she began to smile. Her teeth bared white in the candlelight. Her moustache was silver.

The sheet came down from Laura's face. Her body shivered. Mrs. Pettigrew reached up her fingers to the candle and paused. Her smile became a grin. And the light went out.

Laura heard no sound. She watched where the door should be, hardly daring to breathe. In the dusk of dawn, she saw that the door was open. She was now certain that there had been no nightmare. Before she drifted into sleep she noticed the oppressive smell of a snuffed candle.

Early in the morning Ellen went to the deep hole in the river with the washing. She chose the best stone and began pounding the clothes on it.

Presently a young woman with a basket on her head splashed through the water beside her. It was Intinita, Chi-ju-ju's armour-bearer, his confidential secretary.

'Ellen!' said Intinita.

'Miss Inty!' said Ellen. She hastily transferred her washing to another stone. She had been using the stone preferred by the armour-bearer, and she did not want Chi-ju-ju to put a *duppy* on her.

'You know a man call Mass Archie, Ellen?' said Intinita.

Ellen stopped beating the chemise on the stone and looked at Intinita suspiciously but ingratiatingly.

'No, Miss Inty. I never hear of him. But I will watch out for him.'

Intinita rubbed soap over Chi-ju-ju's trousers, 'Where you get you kerchief, Ellen?' she asked.

'Pshaw, man. Down the Chiny shop.'

'It pretty,' said Intinita.

Ellen preened herself so much that her arm grew strong and she beat a rent into Mrs. Pettigrew's second-best chemise.

Intinita laughed.

'That belong missis?' she asked.

Ellen sucked her teeth and held up the chemise.

'This one no good now. She want a new one, man. Miss Morgan can make them up quick-quick.'

'What wrong with missis? She sick, Ellen? Miss Sarah not feeding them good. They so meagre—like scarecrows.'

Ellen dropped the washing on the stone. She liked to do one thing at a time and there was nobody so liked a good chat like Intinita.

'Sick! Sick!' said Ellen. She placed her hands akimbo and sneered, 'No sick she should sick. No sick she should sick. You know what, Miss Inty. She just a rough-up, just a rough-up Miss Laura. Sick! No sick she should sick. She no sick. At all—at all.'

'Well, him look sick to me.'

'Nothing don't sick her. She just got bad mood 'pon him.'

'Well. What 'bout Miss Laura? Make she a rough him up, then?'

'Well,' said Ellen, 'me will tell you, Miss Inty, for I trust you.' She waded to Intinita's stone and whispered. Ellen described some washing she had done and what the kitchen therefore deduced had caused the sickness at church.

'Lawd-me-God-oh!' said Intinita, rolling her eyes to Heaven.

'Besides,' said Ellen, 'you know, Miss Inty, she don't knock one of we down again or say nothing at all, at all. She don't acting right no more.'

Intinita pounded her washing. She assumed an expression of great distrust.

'Me don't believe you, Ellen.'

'Me not telling no lie, Miss Inty.'

'It's no lie me think you lying, Ellen. Only, Buckra people act different.'

Ellen laughed. 'The mistress wasn't no better.'

'That's a story, anyhow,' said Intinita. She collected her washing and put it in the basket, which she hoisted to rest on a 'cotta' on her head. She trudged past Ellen as if she had been forgotten.

'Miss Inty!' said Ellen. She was annoyed that her confidence had produced no definite results.

'Ellen!'

'You ask Berta, then,' Ellen shouted. Presently she too left the river to return to Newbiggin. She climbed the bank with the clothes on her head. The banana walk was cool as she picked her way through it. She was in the trees nearest the house when she heard sounds of retching. She stopped to investigate and saw that it was Laura.

'That Miss Inty! Now they will believe me,' said Ellen, and she went swiftly to the kitchen.

The breakfast gong gave a clear sweet note. It seemed to Laura that she had heard it ringing for some time. It might have been memory! She lifted herself from the trash and brushed her hands together. There was a weakness in her knees which made her pitch as she walked. The servant women gaped at her as she passed the kitchen, and Ellen began to speak again, striking her palm with her fist.

Mrs. Pettigrew was fingering the sapphire brooch at her throat. She pinned and unpinned it. One thought was uppermost as she rubbed the festering wound in her hand. She no longer liked the brooch.

Laura slipped into her seat and folded her hands for grace as she had been taught to do. She bowed her head, and as Mrs. Pettigrew's voice intoned the prayer the steam off the pot of goat's milk swirled under Laura's nostrils.

'Amen,' Mrs. Pettigrew said. She rubbed her neck with her hand.

'Sarah!'

Sarah ran in with a dish-cloth in her hand. She listened to the mistress but watched Laura greedily.

'Shut that door behind you. And shut this jealousy. See how it give me a crick in the neck?'

'Yes, mistress,' said Sarah.

When she had gone the Mistress handed Laura her plate of fried ham and roasted bananas. Then she helped herself. Her face was grey and thin. Her frown was ridged with hair.

'What you want, Laura, is a good dose of castor oil. There's nothing much a good dose of castor oil won't shift. You see. A good dose of castor oil. That's what you need.'

'I don't need nothing, Mother.'

'It's my place to know what's the best thing for you, miss. I say a good dose of castor oil is what you want, and a good dose of castor oil is what you will get.'

Mrs. Pettigrew spoke with her mouth full. Occasionally she jerked her head to one side to ease the crick.

'All those tongues. All that gossip. I will stop it, once and for all,' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

Laura dammed the oil in her plate between two bananas. There was a fly with one wing swamped in it.

'You see your Aunt Mabel lately?'

'No. Not for a week—or more. She—she sent her love.'

'Pshaw!'

Mrs. Pettigrew grimaced at the wall.

'You don't seem so wrapped up in her as usual. Perhaps you found out she is nothing but a humbug, after all.'

Mrs. Pettigrew put down her knife to rasp over the wound in her palm with her finger-nails.

'You is not so grown up as you think. Pshaw! Sent me her love. Just eat up you food, Laura. You got life to feed.'

There was a frown on Mrs. Pettigrew's brow as she stopped chewing to rub her neck.

'Can I have a cup of coffee, Mother?'

'No.'

'Please, Mother. I am so thirsty.'

'You know the rules, Laura.'

'My throat dried up, Mother.'

'Drink after food, Laura. You know that by now. You know, Laura, you not looking yourself lately. Anything troubling you?'

'Just half a cup. A little sip. Please, Mother.'

'You don't seem like you sleeping well.'

Laura chopped at the ham.

'You don't answer me, Laura. You sleeping well?'

'Yes, Mother.'

She looked steadily into her mother's eyes.

'You know I always sleep directly my head hit the pillow.'

'Then perhaps those nightmares you used to have started again?'

You remember how you used to wake up screaming—screaming that there was someone in your room . . .'

She paused, then continued:

'Someone in your room trying to stifle you!'

Mrs. Pettigrew laughed.

'Such stupidity!' she said.

'Perhaps,' whispered Laura, 'it wasn't no nightmare.'

But Mrs. Pettigrew was attending herself alone. A mouthful of coffee choked her and she sprayed the table. Her jaw and neck had suddenly begun to stiffen. She could not swallow. Pain needled her neck. She turned to Laura and stared in stupid incomprehension.

'What's the matter, Mother?' Laura asked. 'You sick?'

Their glances locked and held. Laura felt the blood mounting her cheeks, the pulse beating hard in her neck. She clutched the table and strained across it towards her mother without being conscious of doing so.

Mrs. Pettigrew's jaws relaxed.

'You'd like to think I was really ill, you heathen. I can see it all in your face, you godless thing!'

Her hands fumbled at her neck.

'You want me dead—so you can have this place. My place. From a child you try to come between us. Now you praying for me to die. Look at your face! If I was a Catholic I would cross myself.'

Her hands came away from her neck and, at the same time, all stiffness disappeared. Mrs. Pettigrew watched the light blurping from the sapphire brooch. Then she flung it across the table and it rolled to Laura's plate.

Laura's spell broke, and she sat down trembling.

'You can keep your pin,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. 'I don't want it.'

'I don't want it neither,' said Laura, shoving it to her mother.

'You will have it, I say,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. She slapped the table with her hand.

Laura jumped to her feet as her mother began to tremble. Mrs. Pettigrew's boots tattooed the floor.

'Then you are ill, Mother! You must be. Look at you!'

The pain lapped her swiftly and went. Mrs. Pettigrew feared it would return. There was an elusive familiarity with it. Her head throbbed.

'You want me send Samson for the doctor, Mother?'

When Mrs. Pettigrew spoke again, her speech was slurred and careful.

'That dirty, stupid old fool! He's nothing but an animal doctor. A horse doctor. Only weak-willed people call in a doctor when there isn't nothing wrong with them.'

Mrs. Pettigrew wanted to be alone. She rose cautiously and walked round the table.

'You won't have to call in the coffin-maker yet, Laura.'

'I want to help you, Mother.'

'Help?' She laughed. 'You can come to paybill this morning with me. I don't need any of your insincere help. But you can come. Don't inconvenience yourself, though.'

Presently Laura heard her gargling. The water was still slapping the pail when Laura went out to find a horse, for the first time that week.

* * *

Laura drew rein at Montrose, the home of Busha MacKenzie. The horse champed under her as she wiped her face on her sleeve. Montrose gates were imposing. They were high and made of iron, painted black. There were always loiterers staring at them, as Laura did now. While she examined them, a man ran out and shoved them apart. Instantly Laura took flight. Beyond the gates, a drive led to the veranda of a large white house with green shutters.

Before the steps was the car. It gleamed like a polished beetle on the gravel. Presently, when Laura was some distance away,

she heard it spurt into life and settle down to a gentle splutter. Laura rode as if at any moment she expected to see it overtaking her. She did not slacken to a canter until she was within the gates of Newbiggin.

She stopped Samson shuffling towards the house. He carried a newspaper parcel under his arm.

'What you got there, Samson?' she asked.

'Liniment, Miss Laura,' he said. 'No, the mistress send me down the Chiny shop for some liniment, Miss Laura. She sick bad, ma'am?'

'I don't know 'bout that, Samson,' said Laura. She kicked the horse and trotted away. She did not see Samson attempting to stand on his hands. He was joyful because Chi-ju-ju's magic had worked.

When Mrs. Pettigrew stepped out into the courtyard ready for the paybill, Laura was following close behind. Mrs. Pettigrew did not want to leave the shelter of her own walls. She stopped and re-tied the veil over her face. But she had to go. The noise and laughter of the labourers came clearly to her.

Mrs. Pettigrew clenched the money-bag and stiffened her back, but her step was timid. Gradually she forced her pace and she was outside the courtyard.

'I want this paybill over quickly today. I promised myself I would go and see that new coffee Levi planting,' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Yes, Mother.'

'Levi is a fool. You take the book from him and call out the names.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'First the names, then the money.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'It will go quicker that way.'

'Yes, Mother.'

There was a pause. Mrs. Pettigrew's skirts bounced on her boots. Suddenly she stopped.

'Regardless of what passion you and the niggers share, you will keep your distance from them, miss.'

Anger made Laura blind. She stumbled over a root.

'If you feel that way, Mother, I can turn back.'

‘You’ll do as I say.’

They walked on in silence. Two men, swinging cutlasses, were running from opposite directions towards the paybill hut. There a crowd of labourers lounged. They were laughing and chatting without restraint. Two men were rolling about before the doorway in a mock fight. A group of women near by screeched whenever one of the men scored a hit. Levi Jones looked round and saw the ladies advancing. He waved the paybill book which he carried.

‘Mistress coming!’ he said. ‘Stand up! Get up, Sam Brown. You don’t sleeping.’

Sam Brown was simulating sleep under a yellow pepper tree. It was the only shade by the office. He shut his eyes more firmly. Levi Jones stubbed his toes against Sam Brown’s ribs and ripped Sam’s shirt.

‘Lawd, Levi,’ Sam said, ‘me just a sleep!’ But he heaved himself up on his cutlass. The movement released a stench of stale urine which everyone ignored. The yellow pepper tree was luxuriant.

Levi Jones trotted up and down among the labourers. He slandered them and their parents and their children. But they understood the delicacy of his position and humoured him. Only Zaccariah, who remained remote from the others, ignored Levi. Levi kept out of Zaccariah’s way. Zaccariah was scowling, and in that mood he was quick to use his cutlass.

Zaccariah watched Laura’s approach with heavy-lidded eyes. His tongue flicked between his lips. When Laura passed him, he slavered and hurried behind the hut.

Everyone else greeted the ladies. The women curtsied and smiled. The men scraped inaccessible parts of their bodies with their cutlasses.

Neither Mrs. Pettigrew nor Laura acknowledged their greetings. Mrs. Pettigrew handed Levi the key to the padlock, and he marched before them to open the door. Sam Brown lifted the lid from the water-butt. It was by one corner of the hut. He gaped at hundreds of mosquito larvæ glancing about in a few inches of water. He dropped the lid. Mrs. Pettigrew looked at him, so he stuck his thumb in an ear and wriggled it. Levi slammed the door against the wall. Everyone watched Levi, and

Sam stopped cleaning his ear. Levi found a stick and braced the door while the ladies entered the hut.

Mrs. Pettigrew had begun to feel ill again and the heat inside the hut assaulted her. She sat quickly on her stool and placed the bag of money on the table.

Outside there was a hum like the sound of bees. The sound increased as the labourers relaxed. Mrs. Pettigrew emptied the bag of coins on the table and began to sort them into cylinders of varying depths and thicknesses. There was a gasp of pleasure from the people pressing against the bar over the door. Usually this made Mrs. Pettigrew smile. Today she fidgeted irritably.

'Levi, give Miss Laura the paybill book. Start calling, Laura. The quicker we finish the better,' she said.

'Shut you mouth,' shouted Levi to the people. They stared at him with reproach. Levi was angry that Miss Laura had the task he enjoyed. He liked to exhibit his book-learning, for it brought him respect.

'Levi Jones,' said Laura. 'Thirty—thirty shillings?'

Instantly there was a cry from the people.

'Thirty shilling! Thirty shilling! Lawd-me-God-oh!'

Levi showed his teeth in a smile, but his eyes were on Mrs. Pettigrew. She shuffled some coins and held them towards Levi.

'Thirty shillings. Stay behind, Levi. I want a word with you.'

'Yes, mistress.'

He pushed the money into the pocket of his new suit and wondered what the word was to be about.

'Nathan Jacob, six shillings,' said Laura.

'Nathan Jacob no dey-yah, mistress,' said Levi.

'Who taking his money for him? Speak up!' said Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Me will, mistress,' said Jeremiah, and the labourers tittered.

'I think I can trust you, Ezekiel. You watch out Nathan get his money, Zekie. I will ask him when I see him.'

It was a proud day for Ezekiel. He collected the three florins, then scraped spit from the back of his throat and shot it over the water-butt. His woman would be pleased when he told her of this.

'Zaccariah Johnston, eight shillings,' said Laura.

Zaccariah Johnston unhooked his right foot from his left knee and pushed himself to the door.

'Is not eight shilling, mistress. Me work five day.'

'What days?' asked Mrs. Pettigrew. She threw back the veil from her face.

'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday me sick, Thursday and Friday, mistress.'

'Four days. Eight shillings. Next?'

'Is not eight shilling, mistress. Is ten. Ten shilling. Me want ten shilling. Me no want eight shilling, Levi Jones, thutty shilling. Thutty shilling, Levi Jones. Zaccariah Johnston, eight shilling. Eight shilling. Is ten. Is ten me want. Is ten me want. Is ten me want. Is ten!'

As Zaccariah spoke, he bent over the ground and slashed it with his cutlass. The people stood aside to give him room. Levi Jones approached the door.

'Stop that, Zaccariah!' he said. He put a trembling hand on the bar across the door.

Zaccariah stopped chopping the ground. He braced himself and leapt towards Levi, brandishing the cutlass above his head. Levi Jones shouted. He scuttled towards Mrs. Pettigrew and stopped. Zaccariah Johnston stopped also, with one leg poised over the bar of the door.

'Man!' he whispered.

Laura looked at her mother. While one hand plucked ineffectively with the button at her neck, the other rummaged among the mounds of coins. Her body reared high and backwards.

'Man!' Zaccariah whispered again.

Levi hugged his shoulders.

'Paybill over!' said Laura. 'Levi, turn the niggers away.'

'Ye-yes, ma'am. Yes, Miss Laura. Yes, ma'am.'

He loosened his arm and pushed Zaccariah outside. He hoped that everyone had seen him do it.

'Go home! Go home! You can all go home. Paybill over today.' His voice was hoarse with terror.

Behind him there was a crash.

'Send four men to the house for a mattress and blankets, Levi. Mistress sick bad,' said Laura.

Mistress, Levi saw, was lying on the dirty floor like any common nigger. He rushed out to obey Miss Laura's orders.

Laura bent over her mother to undo the button at her neck.

Her fingers were numb. Her mother was not only cold, she was stiff. Her body twitched occasionally. Laura was afraid. It was like handling a dead woman. She put her ear against her mother's breast and heard the heart beating faintly.

Laura stood up and drove the spectators from the door. It was hot. She picked up the stool and pushed it under the table. She put her mother's hat and veil upon the table. Now there was nothing for her to do but wait.

Outside the people were clustered in groups. They whispered and stared from Laura to Newbiggin House. A woman dried her eyes on her skirt. This so surprised Laura that she turned round to look at her mother. It was an inquisitive look which turned to one of alarm when she saw that her mother was watching her. She swung back to the doorway and looked outside. Her mother had looked at her like that this morning, she remembered. Her heart beat fast.

She could see the men hurrying from the house with the things she had ordered. The women servants padded over the green turf before them. The air was stirring among the coconut fronds, and it was sweet.

'They coming, Mother,' Laura said at last.

Mrs. Pettigrew's lips were pursed for speech. Her eyes were black and brilliant. Laura waited.

'I sent for help. We got to get you back into Newbiggin.'

Mrs. Pettigrew opened and shut her mouth. Her brow was creased in deep lines. She blinked rapidly.

'What's wrong, Mother? You don't say nothing. You got a seizure?'

Again Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes opened and shut.

'You mean—you can't speak?'

Mrs. Pettigrew's lips puckered together.

The men came panting to the door with the mattress. Samson was with them. He caught Laura's skirt.

'What—what—what—what . . .' he said.

'Lift her on gently,' said Laura, 'and go steady. Tuck the blanket well in, Sarah. Now then. Go slow. No need to hurry.'

The procession moved away. It was followed at a distance by some of the labourers. Samson staggered like a drunken man after it.

Left alone, Laura worked quickly. She scraped the money off the table into the money-bag. She removed her mother's hat and veil from the table and took the paybill book. Then she went out of the hut and locked the door. She overtook the cortège quickly. She approached her mother and spread the veil over her face. Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes opened and shut.

Ezekiel approached Laura.

'When we get we money, Miss Laura?' he asked.

'When I say so,' Laura shouted. Her cheeks were red, and Ezekiel stopped with his lips drooping.

'Levi,' said Laura, 'let Zekie take your place. You go find a horse quick-quick go get doctor. Go on!'

Levi was glad to go. He did not like the way the mistress looked—just as if a duppy had knocked her.

The bearers followed Laura into the house and into Mrs. Pettigrew's room. So impressed and unhappy were they at finding themselves there that they emptied Mrs. Pettigrew like a sackful of yams on her bed and bolted through the back door. There they took up guard, sighing noisily in turn, and saying: 'What a thing. What a thing, eh? What a thing!'

The women servants scuttled from the room before Laura ordered them to stay. Sarah, however, did not intend to be idle. She had had experience with sick-rooms before, and thoroughly understood the requirements of wakes, funerals, marriages and births. She returned to the kitchen to harass the women.

Laura did not want to evade what was obviously her duty. Yet she was chilled by her mother's unnatural stillness. She wandered about the room doing nothing, seeking some opportunity to escape. Her foot collided with the bed. Instantly the bed began to shake. She heard a noise strangling from her mother. Laura saw that Mrs. Pettigrew was gargling saliva and dribbling it over her chin. Mrs. Pettigrew's body was stretching. Her feet twitched.

Laura gaped. Her first reaction was to shut away the spectacle. She ran to the window and pulled down a blind. The room darkened. Laura rested there until her spasm of shivering subsided.

Presently she held up her head. She feared to hear any sound from the bed. But there was none. She moved to the wash-stand.

Her feet dragged. She splashed water into a tumbler and held it to her mother's lips. Mrs. Pettigrew could not swallow. The water washed over her face to the coverlet.

'I am trying to help you, Mother,' Laura said. 'I doing all I can.'

Laura placed the glass of water on the floor.

'I doing all I can, I tell you. Don't look at me like that—as if you accusing me of something!'

Laura moved away.

'I remember what you say today. It's not true. You know it's not true. I don't think so. Your eyes burn too much in the dimness. I will open the blind.'

She ran to the window and plucked the cord. The blind whirled upwards, and the room was bright with sunlight.

Again the bed rattled. Mrs. Pettigrew curved and stretched. Her lips sneered.

'Oh, my God! I can't, I can't,' Laura cried. She dragged down the blind and ran from the room. She stopped by the kitchen door. She was circled by onlookers. Outside the courtyard wall the labourers squatted. They were singing hymns in a slow, doleful manner. To them the mistress was as good as dead.

The servant women hastily ended their discussion. All the pots were on the fire. They were filled with water. Hot water was always useful for one thing or another. Berta was plucking a fowl into her apron. They were Sarah's instructions. The fowl would eventually become a broth for the mistress. Ellen was ripping a sheet into strips because it made a busy sound. Sarah was watching them.

'She was always a just mistress,' said Sarah.

'She was a good mistress,' the other women said.

'A good and just mistress,' said Sarah. 'Good mistresses hard to find.'

'They hard to find to death, man,' said the other women.

They sighed.

'That's true,' said Lucy.

'In the midst of life . . . ' Sarah said.

'We is in death. Amen,' the other women said.

Sarah bent down and fetched the hem of her dress to her nose and gave a long blow into it.

'Berta! You hear the screech-owl last night?' asked Ellen.

'No!' the woman said.

'Well, me hear it. It fly right over the house. Me see it with me two eye. Screeching all the time.'

'Ooooh!'

'I could a-tell you sinthing going to happen,' Ellen continued.

'That's a sure sign,' said Sarah.

'That's true,' said Berta.

'That's true,' said Lucy. 'Me remember when my moomah dead, the night how one screech-owl——'

'Shet up you mouth, Lucy,' said Sarah.

'One picture fall right down off the wall,' said Berta.

'You lying, Berta,' said Sarah. 'How you never say nothing till now?'

'Well, it's only forget me forget, Miss Sarah.'

'Pshaw!' said Sarah.

'And the looking-glass broke too!' Berta said.

'You mean you drop it and broke it, you mean, Berta,' said Sarah.

Berta expected a kick. She jumped aside and feathers choked the air.

'No, Miss Sarah. It's true me a-speak. It just broke itself.'

'Lawk's-me-God-oh!' they said.

Laura expected no less. She knew that her mother's sudden and curious illness would cause speculation among the labourers, and that the tales they told—and their theories—would grow more and more distorted with each relaying. Finally, they would pass as fact. There was nothing she could do to prevent a mystery being built around Newbiggin.

Outside the courtyard, the labourers were moaning a hymn. Their voices carried the tune in four parts while their eyes rested on Laura.

Laura clapped her hands and Sarah came running.

'Get Samson,' Laura said.

'Yes, mistress,' said Sarah, directing Ellen with her lips to find the old man.

'How the mistress is, ma'am?' said Sarah.

'I don't know, Sarah. Only time can tell,' Laura said.

'God's will be done,' said Sarah.

'Amen,' said Lucy and Berta.

Samson hobbled up to Laura. His face was swollen with weeping.

'Samson, Levi gone for the doctor?'

'Long time, Miss Laura.'

'All right. Go and catch a horse and ride down to Mistress Naunton. Tell her Mistress sick bad. To come quick, if she can come.'

She turned away, and Samson faltered after her, with one arm outstretched.

'Miss Laura,' he said.

She turned back to him.

'Miss Laura, me didn't mean no harm, Miss Laura. Me sorry so till, me sorry so till.'

He bent down to cough with sobs. Through the roof of his hat Laura saw his mat of hair.

'You distressing yourself for nothing, Samson. Crying can't alter nothing.'

'Yes'n'

He clamped his nose between finger and thumb and blew.

Laura realized that the gnawing in her stomach was caused by hunger. She went to the dining-room and ate greedily. Everything tasted well. Afterwards she went to her own room. When she emerged from it her steps were lighter. She felt an immediate urge to run into her mother's room and speak to her. She shoved open her mother's door. For a second, fear of her mother returned and stopped her. But it quickly died.

Mrs. Pettigrew lay relaxed in bed. Her eyes travelled over Laura.

'Mother,' Laura said, 'I got to speak to you. I got something to tell you.'

She ran to the bed and clasped her hands together as if she were praying.

'Oh, my God, this is a good moment. I'm so full with thanks I could love almost anything!'

Laura caught the ball topping the bed-post and swivelled on it briefly.

'I am not in the family's way at all. I got proof. You like proof so much, and I can prove it. I am not in the family's way. I feel

drunk like I been drinking your port wine. And glad. The gladness is in my heart—it almost suffocate me!’

Laura absent-mindedly began to unscrew the tiny decorations from the bed.

‘“The ways of the Lord are inscrutable,” I often hear you saying, Mother. And now, you can’t speak. You can’t speak at all. Not even to rejoice with me that I didn’t have a pickney by a nigger man? But how spared you must feel, though you can’t say nothing but gargle? And breathe hard. The ways of the Lord are inscrutable. How true that is, that instead of me lying there in agony, it should be you. The Lord’s ways are inscrutable.’

Laura sat at the foot of the bed.

‘They all think you dying,’ she said. ‘They all had signs, sure signs, Mother.’ She stood up and began to screw on the bed ornaments again. When she finished she went to peer along the edge of the window-blind to the road. There was a trickle of people entering Newbiggin.

‘I think so too,’ said Laura at last. She returned to sit on the bed.

‘I think you are dying, Mother, same as you do. No, don’t excite yourself, you’ll only start jiggling again. I know quite well what you feeling. Believe me, Mother, I do.

‘You know you dying. I can see the truth lying in your eyes. I know what you fear. It’s me. Me getting Newbiggin after all when it means all in all to you. But, Mother, just think. You been saying it for years. You got treasure laid up in Heaven. A new Home.

‘Lord, my God, how you hate me! I used to wonder sometimes if I got swapped at birth and you wasn’t my mother after all. I used to make up all sorts of fancy tales. I never believed I would get a chance to tell you about them. Do you know, I used to think that my real mother was a princess, a real princess, who had her daughter stolen by a wicked witch and she was now a captive pining away in a strange land for me! That was my favourite story. Do you think it was a nice story? One day, I asked Aunt Mabel. She told me. She said you was my mother, really and truly. Do you know, I hid in the coach-house and cried. You remember? When you found me at nightfall, you beat me with your boot.

‘So I hated you more—as much perhaps as you hated me. And

now you lying there can't talk. Can't call me harlot no more. Can't shame me at the mercy seat no more. Can't creep into my sleep and make it nightmare no more.'

Mrs. Pettigrew's fingers walked the coverlet like live animals. Laura laughed.

'Now you are going to die, and God ordained it so you can't talk back. And I no longer fear you. I no longer fear you. Who could be afraid of a skinful of bones and hair? You is as helpless as a mouse in a trap. Now I don't hate you. I got nothing to hate. I can't hate 'hat.'

She pointed at her mother and stood up.

'But I can't forgive you, neither. I can't forgive the shame you put on me when you tried to bring me to the mercy seat. I can't forget the fear you taught me. You wanted me to go with a nigger. A nigger man. You wanted me to go with a nigger man. Why, Mother? Why? Did you never want love in your whole life? Didn't you? But I forget you can't speak.'

Laura tossed her head from side to side. Mrs. Pettigrew's lips moved. Her fingers clawed the bed.

'They call me—they call me "Laura Pettigrew's daughter". They say it like a curse,' said Laura in a hoarse voice. '"Laura Pettigrew's daughter", they call me. The great MacKenzie, Aunt Mabel, Neil Naughton. That's what they call me. As if—as if that signified something. I don't know what. I try and try to think what. But I can't. And I know they mean something. You would know. "Laura Pettigrew's daughter." You and me.'

Laura bent over her mother and grasped her shoulder.

'What they mean, Mother? I can't rest till I know. What's the matter with being "Laura Pettigrew's daughter"?'

'Don't look at me with those eyes. They poison my brain. They burn. Shut them. You can't hate me so much.'

Laura hid her face in her hands and cried. Presently she stopped. She glanced at her mother, and without shifting her glance she ran to the window and shot up the blind.

Mrs. Pettigrew withdrew her lips from her teeth and snarled. She arched and stretched till it seemed that her backbone would snap. Laura lowered the blind thoughtfully.

'I cannot help you, Mother,' she said in a calm voice. She walked past the jangling bed and out of the room.

Mrs. Naunton had arrived and Samson was handing her down from the saddle. Her horse was panting.

'You rode hard, Aunt Mabel,' said Laura.

'Only in sickness and in death, Laura.' Mrs. Naunton carried a small leather case.

The people outside the courtyard stopped singing to listen.

Mrs. Naunton reached Laura. She hugged her and kissed her on each cheek. The rigidity went out of Laura at this show of affection and she began to cry.

'Oh, Aunt Mabel, it's horrible,' she said.

'You poor, poor child! But I am here now. You not alone.'

'Aunt Mabel, she looks so dreadful. I done all I could. I don't know what else to do. She so helpless.'

'There. Cry it out, once and for all. Of course you did all you could,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'You sent for me.'

'And you came.'

'As I always expected to. I been waiting for this a long time now.'

'Waiting?' said Laura. She was startled. 'You mean you knew . . .'

'She is dying?'

'Yes.'

'It come at last, then,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'As I always knew it would. Thank God!'

'You mean—you had a dream?' asked Laura with surprise.

'You would not understand. I only had the knowledge and the hope.'

'Aunt Mabel, what's that you saying? I don't understand.'

Aunt Mabel patted Laura's shoulder and shoved her gently.

'Never mind, Laura. Go and get some fresh air. You look all washed out. Leave your mother to me. She's in my hands now.'

As Mrs. Naunton moved into the house, Laura surveyed the courtyard. She watched Samson rubbing down Mrs. Naunton's horse. The old man was quietly weeping. The mourners outside the courtyard watched her. The women in the kitchen peeped through a crack in the door.

She strode towards the courtyard entrance.

'Miss Laura,' said Samson, 'she don't sick bad, ma'am? She don't sick bad, ma'am?'

'The courtyard wall will be the first thing to come down,'
Laura muttered to Samson's waterlogged eyes.

'Yes'm,' he said.

She walked between the people outside the courtyard. The sun
shone on her face.

Behind, a slow moan began,

'Till we mee-ee-eet—
Till we mee-eet—
Till we meet at Jesus' feet,
(Till we meet)
Till we mee-ee-eet,
Till we mee-eet,
God, be with you,
Till we meet again.'

Chapter Eight

Mrs. Naunton entered the sick-room cautiously. She saw
at once that Mrs. Pettigrew was asleep. She tiptoed to the
wash-stand. She placed her case across the basin, clicked
back the locks, and pulled out a white fall for her head. It was
stiff with starch and cracked when she shook it open.

Mrs. Naunton looked once more at Mrs. Pettigrew, but she
was still asleep. She waddled to the mirror and fitted the fall to
her head. Then, as Mrs. Pettigrew still seemed to be sleeping,
she pulled out the drawers and rummaged through them. Her
hands came limply back to her side.

'Nothing, nothing,' she whimpered.

She moved over to the wardrobe and pulled the doors open.
She did not look at the clothes. Her fingers clawed at the drawers
and boxes. She found nothing.

Mrs. Naunton left the doors open. She stood with a finger
to her lips in complete concentration. Then she ran to the wash-
stand. There was a drawer in it. She pulled it open. It was full
of screws and nails and corks.

Mrs. Naunton whimpered again, but suddenly covered her

lips with a finger. She crept up to the bed quietly, and slipped a hand under the pillow. In desperation she pulled at the mattress. There was a movement from Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Sssh! Sleep, sleep,' said Mrs. Naunton.

She bent over Mrs. Pettigrew. For the first time she really noticed her. Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes were screwed tight. She had been feigning sleep. For a moment Mrs. Naunton felt guilty, but the feeling did not last. Mrs. Naunton's hands automatically smoothed the wrinkled sheets.

'Now, Laura,' she said, 'I come to do my Christian best for you.'

Mrs. Pettigrew made no answer.

'Soon as I heard how sick you were, I got on my horse and galloped here.'

Mrs. Naunton leaned on an arm to look into Mrs. Pettigrew's face.

'I know you are not sleeping, Laura. Squeeze your eyes as tight shut as you may, you are not sleeping.'

'But that don't matter. I can talk to myself and you will hear. You can't help hearing. I live all to myself, lonely, lonely, sometimes I hear myself talking to myself. And I think what a silly old woman I am growing to be! So if you don't say nothing to me, that won't stop me.'

Mrs. Naunton rested her palm on Mrs. Pettigrew's forehead. She moved over to the pitcher of water and wet her handkerchief. She wiped Mrs. Pettigrew's face.

'Laura, it's a long time since I set my foot in your house. Don't be stiff-backed and ungrateful to the end. I come to do my duty to you, as I always hoped and prayed I would one day. I come out of forgiveness. They sent for me. And after all you did to me I come to your aid, Laura. You took everything I wanted out of my life, Laura. You took everything. I come to forgive you, Laura, so your soul can rest at peace.'

'Speak to me. Praise God for my mercy. If any woman had come between me and my husband, Laura, I could never have rested while she lived at peace.'

Mrs. Naunton went to her case for candy. She stuffed her mouth full and sucked noisily. She clashed the bed-springs as she re-seated herself and did not move when the clashing continued

and Mrs. Pettigrew reared and arched. Mrs. Naunton sucked steadily on the candy. When Mrs. Pettigrew grew calm again, Mrs. Naunton sighed.

'So that's it,' she said. 'Samson said a duppy knocked you. He's crying. He's faithful to you, Laura. Fancy! After all these years, he's faithful! But I guessed that was more to it. Now, you taking the long road Home. Now you will learn all the secrets of the Celestial Hereafter before me. You always get before me. That's spiteful of you, Laura. You always want to be first with everything. Always in front of everything.'

Mrs. Naunton sniffed back a tear. She unpinned her fall and put it back into the case.

'I came to turn the other cheek, to aid you in your sickness. But there is no nursing to do. Let us pray together for your soul, Laura, for you have no one else to do it for you, and your time is short.'

Mrs. Naunton knelt beside the bed and clasped her hands.

'Almighty Father,' she prayed, 'I bring before you the soul of this woman lying here. Before you lie her sinful heart, her pride, her spite and her wickedness. Take them unto Thee, O God! When we were young, O Father, she took Pettigrew from me when I chose him and took him from the bush.

Forgive her, O Lord.

When he went away and returned again, she took him back once more so that he would not come to me.

Hear my prayer, O Lord.

When he went away, O Lord, it was only at Thy behest, because I told him what she was and did Thy bidding.

Hear thy servant, O, Lord.

Once more, O Father, did he return. I went to him and said, "Take me, take me, for God's sake, and all mine shall be thine." He laughed. He said I was old. He said "Having tasted Laura, how could I have you? It would be like drinking tea after wine." And he laughed.

Have pity, O Lord.

He went back to her, O Father. And blessed art Thou, for instantly she fell with child and I could send him away again. For it was shameful of her to fall so quick. Spiteful. For he was mine, mine! I found him and she took him. And he came back with

his gold teeth and his watch-chain to claim her, so I sent him away.'

Mrs. Naunton put her hands on the bed and spoke in her normal voice. There was a tinge of blood in Mrs. Pettigrew's cheeks and her eyes were fireballs which slowly travelled over Mrs. Naunton's face.

'I told him, Laura, that you were living in sin with Archie White. Remember how thick you were with him? You said you were young and you could not prevent all the young men following you. And you had Pettigrew yet you used to go riding with Archie White. So I started a rumour.'

She chuckled.

'I told you not to, but you did. Laura, it was all your fault. You see—I couldn't help it. I was lucky. Pettigrew believed every word. He did not know who Archie White was. You never told him; you were too proud. Nobody knew. And I didn't say. You see, when I told about it—it was so easy. We were the closest of friends. They all expected me to know. So I told Pettigrew. You made me unhappy. You took him from me, Laura. When I saw him with you it raped my heart. I had to find peace.'

Mrs. Naunton closed her eyes and clasped her hands again.

'Forgive her, O Lord, her trespasses.'

She opened her eyes.

'He would not even take me with him—when he went back to Panama. But I relied on your pride. Pettigrew had too much pride because he was a poor white, and he never forgot it. I was safe. You and your daughter. You both stiff-backed together. Laura is your true daughter. Pettigrew would have listened to your denials—because he knew how I wanted him, but you were too proud to plead, Laura.'

Mrs. Pettigrew turned her head to the door. Her cheeks had a faint tinge of colour. Her eyes were so eager they seemed ready to walk out of her head. She waited with all her body for the door to open and someone to enter. But the door remained closed.

'Now,' continued Mrs. Naunton, 'I got to do for Laura what I did for you. She is like you. Like you were when I first brought Pettigrew round here—before he left you and went to Panama. Now she wants my boy. She wants Neil to sin with. I cannot

allow it. She shall not have him.' Her voice rose. 'All over again. No, no! Neil will be a big man one day. Important. He's a better man than Pettigrew. He'll be big.

'I am going to take care of her, Laura, same as I did of you.'

Mrs. Pettigrew reared in the bed and a deep snarl came out of her throat. Her teeth bared themselves at Mrs. Naunton.

'You have that to comfort you,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'Amen! Now, I must make you tidy before the doctor comes. Samson said he's been sent for.'

Mrs. Naunton tidied the bed and closed the door and drawers that she had opened.

'You didn't keep Pettigrew's letters then, Laura?' she asked, and waited motionless for a reply.

Mrs. Pettigrew's tongue lolled over her lips. It was smeared with a foam of spittle flecked with blood. Presently Mrs. Naunton moved back to the drawers. She searched them carefully. When again she found no letters, she slammed them shut and wrapped her arms around her head. She began to cry.

Dr. Forsythe entered the room and stood inside the door. Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes rolled at him.

'Well, Laura Pettigrew, it's a long time to wait for a visit to Newbiggin. Mrs. Naunton? Good day to you. You're not sick, then, Mrs. Pettigrew? I'll not believe it. I believe you're stronger than any of those horses I physic.'

While the doctor spoke he was opening his bag. He carelessly flicked away a flake of cow dung from the handle and wiped his hands on his trousers.

'Let's listen to your heart.'

He put the stethoscope in his ears and turned to address Mrs. Naunton.

'You're not still suffering from flatulence, Mrs. Naunton?'

'But I am, Doctor. I don't believe anybody suffered from more chronic flatulence than myself. Flatulence was always—long as I remember—my gravest enemy.'

'What's that?' asked Dr. Forsythe. He took away the ear-pieces and blinked at Mrs. Naunton.

'The wind,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Yes,' said the doctor, replacing the ear-pieces and going over to Mrs. Pettigrew. 'I can quite believe that.'

'What I would do without peppermint, I don't know.' Mrs. Naunton pulled out her handkerchief, and keeping her eyes on the doctor she brayed gently into it.

'I saw your daughter just now, Mrs. Pettigrew. She is a beautiful woman. Beautiful. You'll have to be finding her a husband soon.'

'I am sure that's all nonsense, Doctor. It's such a coarse thing to say,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Coarse?' said Dr. Forsythe. He was just about to sound Mrs. Pettigrew's chest, but he heard Mrs. Naunton's disembodied remark. 'Nothing coarse about that. I see it all the time. We all do it. You did. Cohabitation is as natural as breathing.'

'Doctor Forsythe!'

He chuckled.

'No good getting upset at me. Too late to change. Now. Let's see about my patient. "Duppy knocked her down." Illiteracy and superstition. Take a lot to change that. Always the safe diagnosis. Just draw the blind, Mrs. Naunton. This is a warm grotto.'

'No,' said Mrs. Naunton.

The doctor moved silently to the window and pulled the blind. Instantly Mrs. Pettigrew stiffened and arched. The lips skinned back over her teeth, leaving a grotesque smile. She snarled and her fingers clawed the air.

'Um-um,' said Dr. Forsythe, 'I see.' He shaded the window, but not before he saw Laura standing in the doorway. She looked awed.

'Better for you outside, Miss Laura,' he said.

'I'd rather stay, Doctor Forsythe,' Laura said.

'Let her stay,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Are you staying, Mrs. Naunton?' the doctor asked.

'It's my right,' Mrs. Naunton said.

'Very well,' said Dr. Forsythe. 'Miss Laura, has your mother had a wound?'

'Wound?'

'Yes, has she cut herself?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'Well, then,' said the doctor, 'perhaps she stuck herself with something. Something left outside. Has she complained of—'

'Yes, yes. Her hand. Her right palm. She caught it on my—on the brooch. I know it's been troubling her.'

The doctor turned over Mrs. Pettigrew's right palm.

'Um-um,' he said. 'Look after her.'

Mrs. Pettigrew relaxed and whimpered. Her eyes followed every movement that Laura made. She saw no one else. Occasionally she looked at Mrs. Naunton and immediately again at Laura. They were the only lively thing about Mrs. Pettigrew.

'She must go to hospital,' said Laura.

There was silence. Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes raced to the doctor and back again with entreaty to Laura.

'That won't be necessary. You can do everything for her here. She will be all right,' said the doctor. He began to repack his bag. 'I'll be at Montrose if you need me again. Tending a cow. Mastitis. Poor animal. Well, you can find me if you need me.'

He bent over Mrs. Pettigrew and spoke gently.

'Do not fret, Laura Pettigrew. You have a strong girl here. She's no weakling. She's like you. Children bruise easily and often. But they heal quickly. She had courage. And remember that pain and hardship are the tools that fine character.'

He turned to go.

'She ought to go to hospital,' said Laura. 'She's too sick to stay here.'

'It would be a mistake to do that,' said Dr. Forsythe.

'She ought to have her chance. I got a cart ready to take her. She can get proper nursing at the hospital. Sarah and the servants don't know nothing. You must get her to Port Maria Bay Hospital.'

'I disagree,' said Dr. Forsythe.

'I don't. She ought to have her chance.'

'It can't make any difference to the outcome. If you insist, I must accompany her.'

'We will get her ready.'

'You are so young, Miss Laura.'

'Sixteen. I am sixteen!'

'I know your age. I delivered you. I did not mean physical age.'

He strode angrily from the room and returned to his buggy. There he sat chewing tobacco and spitting it over the back of his mule.

Dr. Forsythe saw Samson on the bullock cart. Samson was in

full regalia, with his top hat and his best coat and his spotted handkerchief. Samson wore no boots because he wanted to think and to weep without encumbrances.

Presently Mrs. Pettigrew was brought out on her mattress and placed under the shade of tarpaulins. She was dressed in white and a veil covered her face. When Dr. Forsythe saw that she was settled, he flicked his whip and the procession moved forward.

The bullock cart creaked and rumbled, the accoutrements jangled over the bullocks.

Samson was hunched in his seat, unable to cry. Sarah crouched over her mistress in terror. But she wiped the sweat and held Mrs. Pettigrew's body when the cart wheels went into ruts. She was crying not from pity but from fear.

Laura came running towards the cart. Samson stopped. Laura climbed beside her mother. She uncurled her fingers and pinned the sapphire brooch she held upon Mrs. Pettigrew's chest. She did not want to touch her. But she found herself sobbing over the brooch. She kissed her mother's cheek. Mrs. Pettigrew's eyes smiled.

'Carry on, Samson,' she shouted, and ran back to weep in Mrs. Naunton's arms.

The cart rolled slowly on. Sometimes Mrs. Pettigrew screamed and stiffened. At these times Samson stopped, and Sarah and he shivered with shock. The doctor visited her twice without saying anything either time.

The earth was sweet. Cane shimmered in the fields. A faint breeze, hot and dusty, was rising. It wagged with the banana leaves. A cloud formed and grew menacing in the sky.

The doctor paid his third visit to Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Turn back,' said Dr. Forsythe.

Sarah and Samson were speechless.

'She—she dead, sah?' Samson asked.

'Yes. Heart stopped.'

Sarah bounded down from the cart and ran screaming between the rows of followers, towards Newbiggin and the mistress.

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Chapter Nine

Mrs. Pettigrew's funeral was the biggest social event which Newbiggin had seen for years. People came from all over the parish, by horse, foot and motor. Laura was astonished at the names she read on the cards accompanying the wreaths. Some of them belonged to well-known and influential people whom she had never seen before.

Laura was tired of talking to people. She stole away and wandered alone through the darkened rooms. They reeked of flowers. The floors bore clay tracks. It was still and airless. Each moment she expected to hear her mother's voice harshly ordering Sarah to make the house presentable.

Laura slipped quietly out of the house, away from the constant snivelling and chattering of Aunt Prue. People were still coming and going from Newbiggin, and Aunt Prue was accosting them to praise the goodness of the dear departed's soul.

It was muddy in the banana walk. Laura was enticed by the roar of the river to look at it. The rains had fallen heavily, and the river was swelling over the washing-stones in a thick yellow flood. She watched a branch, a cat and a hat float past her. Then she went home. She stopped when she could see the house again, and hid behind a guango tree to spy upon it. Her heart beat rapidly. Her palms sweated. All this was hers. Then she thought of Aunt Prue, now obliged to live with her at Lawyer Reid's dictation.

At that moment Aunt Prue glimpsed Busha MacKenzie riding into Newbiggin. It was a totally unexpected pleasure. Aunt Prue picked her way like a chicken through the muddy grass to Busha MacKenzie. He lifted his cap, but did not descend from his horse. Very correctly he delivered his condolences to be conveyed to the new mistress of Newbiggin. Aunt Prue was most impressed.

'Won't you come inside and partake of a small port, Busha MacKenzie?' she said.

'I must decline,' he said. 'My family will be expecting me home. Good day.'

'But you surely not going yet?' said Aunt Prue, putting her

hands on the neck of his horse. The horse flung its head. 'You only just come. And you must have a word with Laura. She would quite appreciate it, Busha MacKenzie.'

Busha MacKenzie blushed.

'I really must be going.'

'I am Laura's Aunt Prue—Mrs. Prunella Burton. I guess you must know my husband, Matthew. Just now he hurt his head. He fell on it, you know.'

'I hope he will soon recover. Good day, Mrs. Burton,' said Busha MacKenzie.

'Stay! Stay!' said Aunt Prue. She held his stirrup and hopped after the horse. 'I really wanted a word with you. You know I am Laura's guardian. It legal. Don't you buy up coconuts?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then. Look. We got them here in thousands. You can have what you want. How many? How much you give? I want a good bargain.'

He looked at Aunt Prue with astonishment.

'Delivered to your door!' she said.

'That won't be necessary. Good day.'

'But you can't! Listen to me,' said Aunt Prue. She glanced apprehensively towards the house. 'Provided it's on the nail, I'll take whatever you offer. You collect.'

'As you wish,' said Busha MacKenzie. He spurred his horse and rode away.

Aunt Prue was left holding his card.

She returned to the house bearing it triumphantly before her. Since Laura was nowhere in the house, Aunt Prue visited the kitchen. The servant women were busily handing out food to a succession of labourers, all dressed in their best.

'Sarah!' said Aunt Prue.

'Yes, Miss Prue,' Sarah said.

'You can call me "Mistress" from now on, Sarah. It's legal. You see Miss Laura?'

'No—Mistress.'

'That's better.' Aunt Prue sighed. 'It was a very good funeral, Sarah. It sure to pleased the old mistress. She was a dear, good woman. I don't know how much we will miss her. She set us a divine example to follow with her piety and charity.'

'She was a good woman,' said Sarah.

'She was a good woman,' said Berta.

Ellen sniffed.

'She was just,' she said. Ellen lifted her apron with the drawn-thread work and decided against blowing her nose in it.

'She was,' said Lucy.

They all nodded.

'It's hungry business, though,' said Aunt Prue. 'Bring me a mug of that chocolate boiling on the fire, Sarah, a big chicken leg and some white bread and some of that imported jam. Take it into the mistress's bedroom. Don't hand out no more food, Sarah. Somebody got to pay for it, you know.'

She turned round and tripped over the hem of Mrs. Pettigrew's poplin skirt. No one spoke. When she went into the house the women went one by one to the door and spat into the courtyard.

'The mistress!' said Sarah.

'Lawd-me-God-oh!' said Lucy.

They knew better than to laugh out loud when there was a funeral in the house.

Laura came back to the house through the courtyard.

'Sarah,' she called, 'don't you got nothing to give these people to eat? They all got empty hands.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

The women smiled as she went indoors. A wan smile was permissible.

It rained again during the night, and the morning was heavy with the promise of further showers. Levi came early to the back door to receive his orders from the new mistress.

Laura had not slept, but lain awake pondering the events which had led to her mother's death and the presence of a card from Busha MacKenzie. It seemed to Laura that already she was being accepted into the community life of her own class.

'What do you want, Levi?' she asked when the foreman sent for her.

'You got any order, Miss Laura?'

'Orders?' asked Laura.

'Yes'm.'

'Well, I want that stone wall knock down completely,' Laura said.

'Today, Miss Laura?'

'Some time.'

'It's 'bout the planting, ma'am. The coffee don't finish planting out, Miss Laura. But the cane don't done neither. The banana suckers will rot if they don't go in——'

'Keep quiet, Levi,' said Laura. She held her head. It ached. 'Carry on as before. I—I don't got nothing fresh for you today—except put two men on cleaning up this yard.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

She went in to breakfast to find Aunt Prue sitting in her mother's place. She was eating a big breakfast and for the moment could not speak.

Laura seated herself and put her head on her arms. Presently she drank some coffee. She could not eat in Aunt Prue's presence.

'Isn't that Mother's shirt you got on, Aunt Prue?'

Aunt Prue blushed and looked at the door.

'Don't bother. They all know Mother's clothes too.'

'Well, I won't stop to be insulted one moment longer!' said Aunt Prue, cringing out of the room. She knew she should not have put them on, but Aunt Prue could not resist Mrs. Pettigrew's calf-skin boots and she was wearing them.

'I'm going to visit your mother's grave. You should do the same and show her your respect.'

Laura ignored her.

Aunt Prue used Mrs. Pettigrew's horse and saddle. She sat proud and straight as she cantered down Newbiggin drive. She wished Matt could see her. It was too bad he had fallen on his head—a calamity which might make him even more stupid than before.

Aunt Prue fancied a ride round the estate. She bowed here and there to the labourers, but they ignored her. When she saw the women planting a field of coffee she decided to exert herself.

'Who in charge here?' she asked.

Levi came forward. His lower lip hung dangerously.

'You in charge?'

'Yes.'

'You speaking to the mistress. Isn't your name Levi?'

'Yes'm.'

'You can stop planting out coffee here. This land never had

nothing in all my days but sugar cane. You can pull up all them plants.

'Miss Laura——'

'Miss Laura? I am Miss Laura guardian, Levi. Next, I want five or six hundred big seed dry coconut, picked and husked by the week. Don't go picking none round the house where it will show —where it will mess up the yard. Pick down at Water Bottom and in the banana walk. They is for Busha MacKenzie, you know. Now, remember what I say 'bout that cane, Levi. Never seen no coffee in here in all my born days. Never.'

Miss Prue yanked at the bridle and galloped away with her arms flapping against her sides.

Chapter Ten

Mrs. Pettigrew had frequently told Parson Bickett that when she died she wanted to lie by the kirk gates to be a sentinel over her kirk. Parson had respected her wishes and planted her there. He knew quite well that he ran the risk of smaller congregations to the night services, since the people were terrified of duppies. They would expect Mrs. Pettigrew's duppy to be formidable. At the service over the grave he had exhorted them all to listen, and to know, that the departed mistress was gone to roam no more, into hallowed and consecrated ground.

Time would tell whether his plea had any effect.

Miss Prue was not troubled by any thoughts of duppies, only by mud. She tramped round and round the grave, constantly shifting the flowers from one spot to another. She was intent on ramming a vase into the ground when she heard her name called.

'Miss Prue,' a man said.

She looked up, flushed with surprise, into the grinning face of Archie White.

'Archie White! Wherever you spring from? I've not clapped eyes on you for years and years.'

Archie White flung a leg across the saddle and jumped to the

ground. He was a short man with a wrinkled face. He went to Aunt Prue and shook her hands at length.

'Well, well, well!' he said. 'You don't look a day older. Not a day, Miss Prue. How life treating you?'

'Off and on,' she said, and lied: 'You look well. You prosperous too?'

'Can't really complain, you know. Could be better, perhaps.'

He stuck his hands in his pockets and stopped grinning.

'This Laura grave? I heard she dead only this morning.'

'Fancy that.'

'I would have come to the funeral otherwise.'

'It was a lovely funeral.'

'Look at them flowers!'

'Everybody. Even Busha MacKenzie, and you know they really think they special.'

'Poor Laura!' said Archie White. 'All that vitality put away for ever.'

'There wasn't too much of that in late years, let me tell you, Archie. She got stiff and hard and mean.'

'She leave anything?'

'Anything! Come into the kirk and we can talk. Hitch your horse beside mine on the orange tree.'

Two women listened by the fence and watched them walk into the kirk.

'Laura build this, you know. With her own money,' said Aunt Prue with pride.

'Well, well!' said Archie White.

'She had that pulpit carved specially. Real lignum vitae wood.'

'Well, well!'

'This is the family pew. It got a foot-stool.'

'A foot-stool, eh?'

'Yes. Then you ask if she leave anything! She did. And all going to that little madam, all to Laura.'

'Laura. That's the child, eh? I remember her from last time. Pretty little pickney, she was.'

'Pshaw! Laura didn't expect to die or she would make a will. I sure of it. She would never leave me out of a will. Now what? Nothing at all, I get. Except I am guardian——'

'Guardian, eh? You got a chance there to feather your nest.'

'You never let a point slip, Archie.'

'Nothing but a gambler, Prue.'

'That's true. Still——'

'Listen, Prue; you mean you can't get you' hands on no cash at all, at all?'

'Nothing. Tight.'

Archie White took some nuts from his pocket and flung them into his mouth.

'When you stop this guardian business?'

'Christmas.'

'Not much time, eh?'

'What you thinking?' asked Aunt Prue.

'Well, well! I just thinking, Prue. Supposing there ain't no will—we must try——'

'There isn't no will, I said.'

'Yes. But—supposing you could upset Laura's claim, eh?'

'Eh?'

'Suppose you could . . . But nobody would believe you,' said Archie White, and laughed.

'No. They wouldn't. Mark you, there was that scandal. You remember?'

'What scandal that?'

'I must go home. Is dinner-time. I can't invite you, Archie. Laura wouldn't like it.'

'That's all right, Miss Prue.'

'Where you living?'

'Oh, anywhere. A rolling stone.'

'Come up to Newbiggin and see me the middle of tomorrow morning. I got an idea want thinking out.'

'See if you can use your influence. I buying up cows cheap.'

She looked at him with a frown.

'Well, I don't know. I might—no. It would only cause rows.'

They walked out of church together and mounted their horses.

'I married, you know, Archie. I am Mrs. Burton now.'

'He's a lucky man, Miss Prue.'

'You don't change at all, Archie. You still the same old flatterer.'

Archie White laughed.

'You is as pretty as ever,' he said, and her face mottled in confusion as she rode jauntily away.

But Aunt Prue's jauntiness wilted as soon as she saw Laura waiting for her. Laura was striding up and down the courtyard, slapping her boots with a switch. She was angry with everyone, but more so because she had been certain that Neil would come to her today. He had not.

The servant women bunched themselves around the cracks in the door. They saw Samson creep forward to hold the horse's head. The bones felt powdered in his knees so that they buckled as he walked.

'Come into the house, Aunt Prue,' said Laura.

'What's all the to-do?' said Aunt Prue. She followed timidly, aware now of the dirt on Mrs. Pettigrew's best clothes and boots.

Laura went into Mrs. Pettigrew's room.

'You can take Mother's clothes off, Aunt Prue, for a start. I didn't give them to you—and they don't belong to you. There's a name for what you done. But you is a relation, so I will let that pass. Suffice it to say, if Sarah or Ellen or Berta . . .'

'Or Lucy?' said Aunt Prue with a sneer.

' . . . or Lucy done what you done I would have them in the lock-up in no time at all. That's the first thing. Here's the second, Aunt Prue. You is only here because the lawyer said I got to have a guardian till I am sixteen. Don't take too much responsibility on your shoulders, and when I give an order to Levi don't you go behind my back and countermand it. Now, then, eat all you want and get fat. But don't interfere with the running of Newbiggin.'

'Newbiggin. Pshaw! You all idolize it. You don't know it is heathen to put up images to worship? Your mother the same. But don't think you going to get it all ways, Laura. I know what I know. And I know that as your legal guardian I got to direct you along the right way—influence you and advise you. Now I telling you, in all my born days I never hear of coffee—'

'Just take Mother's clothes off, Aunt Prue.'

'All right,' said Aunt Prue. She was flushed and angry. 'You want it that way. We will see. We will see what come to Newbiggin in the end.'

She raised her voice and shouted, so that Neil, who had just ridden into the courtyard, heard.

'You know a man name White? Name of Archie White? No? I guess not. But he know something and I know something. And between us, we'll find out about this—Newbiggin—of yours.'

'You know, Aunt Prue,' said Laura, 'I never noticed before how you got a neck like a chicken—all skin and bumps.'

Laura laughed.

'You—you little madam! And your mother not cold in the grave yet, you speak to me, to me, like that. After all I done for you,' said Aunt Prue, weeping loudly. She walked to the wall and beat on it with her fists.

'Weeping won't get you nowhere,' said Laura. She went to eat her food.

Directly she left, Aunt Prue stopped weeping to suck her thumb. Presently she bent down and hunted under the bed. She found a tin trunk which she lifted out so as to cause little noise. When she opened it, it was empty.

'Yes, yes, yes,' she said, and nodded several times. Quickly she flung off Mrs. Pettigrew's clothes and bundled them into the trunk. She unlaced the boots, and after casting about and finding nothing to wrap them in as they were muddy, she gritted her teeth and put them under the skirt. After all, the skirt would wash.

It humiliated Aunt Prue to appear in the dining-room in her own washed-out clothes. She squeezed past Laura and sat down in Mrs. Pettigrew's chair.

'Am I entitled to food, Laura?' she asked.

'Eat all you want,' said Laura.

'Sarah!' Aunt Prue called.

Sarah appeared behind her.

'I want a big bowl of pea soup with a lump of ham in it. No need telling me you don't boil no ham in it. I got my nose. Now then, Laura. You going out this afternoon?'

'No.'

'You mustn't sit at home and brood. We all lose a loved one from time to time. I been thinking I will visit Mrs. Naunton this afternoon.'

'What about?' asked Laura. She waited for her answer until Aunt Prue sucked soup into her mouth.

'What about, eh? Manners. Somebody ought to thank her for all she done for your mother, Laura. After all, she did put herself out to come here, you know.'

'No, she didn't. It wasn't no trouble to her.'

'You wrong there. She told me herself. She told me herself. She was expected up at Montrose, but she heard your call as being more urgent. So somebody should say a "Thank you". You know that very well. You wouldn't like to go yourself?'

'No!' said Laura, leaving the table to watch the road. She trailed her skirt across the grass. Her boots squelched in the pot-holes. Laura walked to the gates and peered up and down the road. Then she turned back, kicking a stone before her.

Sarah was watching for her. She met her in the courtyard with a curtsy.

'Is Samson, Miss Laura,' Sarah said.

'What about him, Sarah?'

'Him sick, Miss Laura.'

'Oh.'

'Him pining, Miss Laura. Him don't come bother me no more for food, ma'am. Him just a-sit down in a-one corner, ma'am. First him stare, then him call out, then him holler, ma'am.'

'Where Samson is?'

'Him in the coach-house, ma'am.'

'All right, Sarah.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Sarah went back to the kitchen.

'Something gone wrong,' she said.

'How so?' asked Lucy.

'Something gone wrong somewheres.'

'True, Miss Sarah?' asked Ellen.

'Nothing to do with you, Ellen. But I think Samson know what.'

'Go-long!' said Berta.

'That's so,' said Sarah.

Laura saw Samson. He had wedged himself into an angle of the wall.

'Ah! Ah! Ah!' he whimpered.

'Corrie, old man, Sarah say come get you food.'

'Food? Yes, food. Ah.'

Laura took his hand. When she let it go, it slapped his thigh.

'Don't frighten, so. Me not no ghost.'
'Duppy!' he whispered. 'Missis will haunt me.'
'Missis don't got no time to haunt you. Come. Eat your food.'
'I didn't mean Missis no harm. God my witness. I didn't mean no harm. I didn't know.'

'Come, old man.'

Laura took his arm and led him to Sarah.

'Give him some food, Sarah. You gwine eat it, Samson,' said Laura. She left Samson with Sarah and went into the house.

'Come, Samson,' said Sarah. 'Lucy, get off that mortar. Sit down, Samson.'

'What you know, Samson?' asked Berta.

'You don't shut you mouth you gwine feel the back of my hand,' said Sarah.

'I didn't know,' said Samson.

Lucy, Ellen and Berta looked hard at Sarah. Sarah was stirring the pot.

Aunt Prue minced across the courtyard on her way to visit Mrs. Naunton.

'Miss Sarah!' said Lucy. 'Look Missis!'

'Missis!' said Sarah, sucking her teeth.

'You know,' Lucy said, 'I don't never like Miss Prue.'

'Me neither,' said Berta.

'Neither me,' Ellen said.

'Missis!' said Sarah.

'Whoy! Lawd-my-God-oh!' screamed Samson.

Before the women recovered from the shock Samson rushed out of the kitchen. Sarah saw him loping through the banana walk. She slammed the window shut and bolted it.

'Man frighten me, man,' panted Ellen.

'Man mad, man,' said Lucy.

'Mind you business, Berta,' said Sarah.

'I didn't say nothing, Miss Sarah,' said Berta.

'You was going to, Berta,' said Sarah.

When the weakness overtook Samson, he fell to his knees, knowing that he was near to death. He could already hear the waters of Jordan roaring in his ears, deafening him.

'I coming, Master,' he said. 'Take me over the river!'

He crept on his hands and knees towards the banks he believed

to be near. But his knees collapsed and he lay crying in the mud. A grass lizard peered unblinkingly at him. Samson moved. First one knee, then the other, then one arm, and the other. The river grew closer.

'I am coming, Lord, a sinful sinner. Take me.'

But his knees stopped obeying him. He knew then that he was paralysed. He knew it without surprise and without fear.

'But I didn't mean to kill you, mistress. Just a oil-o'-sick-me,' he said.

He grasped the stick extended to him above the ground. Perhaps it was Moses come with his staff to separate the waters. He dragged his knees. His belly was coated with mud. The stick moved, and he followed. The roar of the Holy River dwindled to a distant murmur.

Samson's heart was lightened. His body rose to its knees. He smelt the reek of death. Ammonia stung his nostrils. He looked beyond the stick. The stick grew into a staff, whitened and feathered. On the ground were the feet of Chi-ju-ju. Samson's hands fell away from the staff and he lay still on the ground.

Quickly Chi-ju-ju fetched a gourd of water from his hut. He splashed it over Samson's head and chanted.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju,
Hear Chi-ju-ju.
Chi-ju-ju say
Wake up.
Wake up, Samson
And live.
Chi-ju-ju say, wake up,
Samson, and live.
Don't afraid
Chi-ju-ju near.
Chi-ju-ju near to heal.
Don't afraid, Chi-ju-ju near to heal.
Chi-ju-ju speak.
Hear Chi-ju-ju.'

Samson opened his eyes.

'Missis dead,' he said.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju,' said the obeah man.

'Missis dead. I didn't mean no harm. Not a oil-o'-kill-me!'

'Hear Chi-ju-ju,' sang the obeah man.

'Missis dead,' Samson said.

'Listen me, nigger man, somebody else got trouble besides you. You old fool. Listen me,' said Chi-ju-ju before beginning to chant again.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju!

Hear Chi-ju-ju.

Missis is gone

Missis is gone to Heaven

Missis is gone to Heaven to the heavenly choir
of Archangels.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju.

Hear Chi-ju-ju, Samson.

Open your ears and listen.

For you is innocent,

As innocent as the new-born babe.

For you is as innocent as the new-born babe.'

Samson rolled over on his back and sat upright. He could feel the life pouring back into his body.

Chi-ju-ju began to skip and leap round him, sprinkling water indiscriminately.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju.

Hear Chi-ju-ju.

Go home.

Go home and fret no more.

Go home and fret no more.

'The young mistress

The young mistress in my hand.

The young mistress in Chi-ju-ju hand.

For I will lead her

And I will guide her,

And I will keep her from harm.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju.

Chi-ju-ju speak.

Walk and go home.

Go Home.'

Samson heaved himself to his feet and floated among the banana trees, for his body was as light as a breath of cotton, and his heart hovered in his breast like a doctor bird before a lily.

Chi-ju-ju flung himself to the ground and swallowed what remained of the water in the gourd. He lifted his staff, and the armour-bearer appeared.

'Watch out for Miss Laura,' he said.

Chapter Eleven

NEIL Naunton strode under the coconut trees whittling a stick. He was not making anything. He was thinking of the quarrel he overheard at Newbiggin. His horse cropped and stamped against the hedge.

He threw the stick into a trench, shut and pocketed his knife. He swore and turned to his horse.

'Mother!' he said when he saw Mrs. Naunton approaching. She walked in a brisk line to him.

'Oh, Hell, what now?' he said. 'He went to meet her.'

'Mother! What you doing out here? You feel all right? Must be years you never come and see what I am doing.'

He glanced guiltily at the uncultivated field.

'See all this?'

He waved about him.

'You can't go by how it look now. You won't know it next year. You wait. Soil too tired. Giving it a good rest before I plant out with banana. Banana! But capital, capital! How to get more capital?'

'Neil!' said Mrs. Naunton.

'You look so eat-up, Mother, and white. That walk tired you out. You shouldn't come out when there's storm clouds hanging about. And thundery. You know you always frightened to death of them.'

'Neil! You didn't see Laura today?'

'Well—no. I didn't. You want to go down there now?'

'No, no. I got ideas for you, Neil. That woman came round just now.'

'And upset you, too. What woman?' asked Neil.

'The cousin. That Prunella Burton. Oh, what a traitorous woman!'

'What she done then, Mother?'

Mrs. Naunton opened her lips.

'Poor Laura! Poor child!' she said.

'What! You don't mean she sick?'

'No. Worse—much worse.'

'She not—not in the family's way?'

'She is a bastard.'

'That's a lie!' Neil shouted. 'Why, you can tell anyone that.'

'That's never the sort of thing anyone can be certain of, Neil. You didn't know Laura like I did.'

'But you know she born after Pettigrew got back home from Panama? Don't you? Besides, there's her birth certificate. That will prove it.'

'If there was one,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'I don't believe she was ever registered. Prue Burton said she never laid eyes on one yet.'

'Oh, this is madness—madness,' said Neil, striding up and down.

'Such scandal, darling. Now, Laura may lose her land if she can't prove who she is. And that White is back again—no sooner than Laura is dead.'

'Yes, I know. I seen him, I seen him. It's like vultures gathering to pick a corpse. Poor little Laura. I will go round and have a word with her.'

'Wait,' said Mrs. Naunton, plucking at his sleeves. 'Wait, darling, and think. That's why I brave my heart and the heat and the long walk to come here to see you first. I thought if Neil should hear this wicked news—he is so impulsive he will want to go straight round and stand by Laura, because he has always known her and been fond of her like a little sister. But, Neil, I know what scandal is like, how it can harm you—can take your livelihood and future away. You got a lot to be thankful for, darling. There's such a lot waiting for you. You don't want to spoil your chances.'

'But, Mother, you don't mean I can't go and tell Laura I sorry? See if I can't do nothing?'

'You are a big man, Neil. I won't ever stand in the way of

what you think is your duty. I brought you up to know your mind and stick to what it says. You know best what is your duty here. To bring shame and scandal on myself and you or to go and get yourself smeared like Laura Pettigrew was years ago.'

'Yes, she suffered for it.'

Mrs. Naunton sniffed back the tears.

'Don't cry, Mother, God, people will see you!'

'I don't care who sees. In the end, what will it matter? I am only a stupid old woman who must end her days in shame.'

'Don't say that, Mother. You know I'd never do anything would harm you.'

'But you're going straight round to Newbiggin now. I know. To console Laura. I don't have anyone to console me. Poor Laura!'

'Mother, I am not going round to Newbiggin to console Laura.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Not today or tomorrow?'

'Not today or tomorrow. So dry your eyes. Smile,' said Neil.

'Or—or ever?' Mrs. Naunton asked in a tiny voice. She twisted her handkerchief in her hand.

'For ever is a long time, Mother. I can't promise that. I like Laura—like a sister. Ever is too long.'

Mrs. Naunton abruptly waddled away.

'Mother! Don't go off like that! All right. To please you, not ever.'

'Oh, Neil! Give Mother a hug!'

Neil hugged her, glancing apprehensively about.

'Time you went home, old lady,' he said.

He took her arm and led his horse, and together they returned to their home.

The day cooled, though the clouds massed. By the time Neil washed his face twilight had fallen, and the lamps were lit when he pomaded himself for the evening.

He called a farewell to his mother. This was usual at that time of night. She came out on the veranda and watched the night gobble the blur of his shirt. Mrs. Naunton followed his progress by the echo of his horse's hooves. At night sound travelled far.

There was a horse tied to the post outside the Chinaman's bar. It moved into the light coming from the doorway. It was a chestnut. Neil dismounted and tied up his horse. He examined the chestnut carefully. He did not know it. It was well tended, and its trappings were beautiful and strange. The saddle, which was highly polished, had a design of roses embossed upon it. All the metal-work on the harness was silver.

Neil whistled. For all its strangeness, there was something familiar about the horse.

The bar was quiet. Either it was empty or the customers were cowed into silence.

'Charley!' Neil called the moment he crossed over the threshold. 'Pour me out a rum.'

The stranger had his back to the door. His head rested in his hand as he leaned on the counter. He was a little man. Neil swaggered to the counter and felt his size growing mighty beside the stranger.

Neil picked up his rum and swallowed it.

'Another one,' he said, facing the room. The usual customers were stuck against the wall.

'What wrong with you? Charley, give them a rum,' Neil said.

Charley chuckled and became busy.

'When you done work—you enjoy yourself. Eh, Sammy? Spend all you money yet?'

'Yes, sah,' said Sammy Johnson.

'You old rogue!' Neil laughed. He looked at the counter to see if he had wakened the little man.

The little man was laughing quietly as he watched Neil.

'Well, well! It must be you grow up to be such a big man?' he said, extending his hand. A ruby sparkled on his third finger.

'My name is White—Archie White. Just returned from Panama. I used to know your family well.'

Neil felt his body shimmer.

'I don't know you,' he said. He reached over Archie White's hand to his rum. He sipped it deliberately, then walked out. The bridle tinkled. The horse moved, and Neil Naunton cantered away.

Archie White threw some money on the table.

'The gentleman didn't pay for the drinks, Charley,' he said.

He went towards the door, when he saw Samson.

'Don't I know you?' asked Archie White.

Samson shuffled his feet.

'You is that Samson. Missis's coachman.'

'Yes, sah.'

'You still living, then?' laughed Archie.

'Yes, sah.'

'So Missis dead, eh?'

'Yes, sah.'

'You must get on well with the new missis—with Miss Prue.'

'Miss Laura the new missis, sah.'

'You black shit!' said Archie, and went outside. He found a girl stroking the neck of his horse. She did not appear to know that he was there.

'You treat that horse like it was a man,' said Archie White.

She looked at him in simulated surprise with her tongue between her teeth. Archie went close to her and put his hand over hers. She pulled his hand to her breast at once.

'You is a hot little thing,' he said.

'You sleeping here tonight?' she asked.

'I don't got a bed,' he said.

'I find one,' she said.

Archie laughed and peered into the darkness. He pulled her. She did not move.

'You know Miss Laura, Mass Archie?'

'You know me name?' he asked.

'Me know everything. Me see you this morning talking Miss Prue. You know Miss Laura.'

'I know her.'

'The new mistress pretty,' she said.

'Who?' he asked.

'Miss Laura,' Intinita, the armour-bearer said.

'Come, we go down the bush,' said Archie White.

★ ★ ★

Aunt Prue trailed after Laura wherever she went next morning. She wanted to get Laura out of the house before Archie came. She did not want Laura and Archie to meet prematurely, for

Archie was too impressionable. During the night she had worked out her plan. Now, it all depended upon Archie's co-operation. Aunt Prue would have to lead him carefully past the facts she did not want him to know.

'You know how many sheets you got?' Aunt Prue asked Laura.

'No.'

'Nor how many table-cloths and towels, and serviettes and kitchen cloths and pillow cases and——'

'For heaven's sake, Aunt Prue!'

'You better check them, Laura. Or is thief they will thief them, you know. You know servants, Laura. You want me count them for you?'

'Don't bother. Mother counted them last month.'

'Oh!' said Aunt Prue angrily. 'Then she write it down, then?'

'No. She don't got to.'

'Then you do know?'

'I told you. I don't know, Aunt Prue.'

'Oh!' said Aunt Prue. She scratched her palm with her fingers. 'You don't know how many you got?'

'I going out to see what they doing,' said Laura.

'You don't really know nothing about managing, Laura,' said Aunt Prue.

'Listen, Aunt Prue,' said Laura. She could feel her cheeks hot. 'I know what I doing.'

'You know how to manage a big plantation like this? And this—this mansion? And these servants? And you cattle? And you labourers? And——'

'I heard you, Aunt Prue.'

'That's why I is your guardian to help you. That's why I belong here. It's too much for you alone.'

'When I am sixteen—it's out you clear out,' said Laura.

'Of all the gratitude!' sniffed Aunt Prue.

Laura went away to find Levi. Aunt Prue went away to find sheets and pillow-cases and table-cloths and serviettes. She rammed an armful of these into the trunk under the bed. There were six bottles of port wine standing on the wardrobe floor. One was already broached. Aunt Prue's hands hovered over them. She snatched up four bottles and shoved them in the four corners

of the trunk. Then she pulled out two bottles and stood them on the floor. She shut the trunk and pushed it under the bed. But she hauled out the trunk again and put another bottle between the sheets.

Aunt Prue was satisfied. She returned the rejected bottle to its two companions and the three dust-rings on the wardrobe floor.

Laura met Archie White as she rode down the drive. She did not stop to question his presence. She thought that he was either tanned or coloured. But he had no class.

'You can wait for me in the courtyard,' she said, riding past him.

He grinned at her and lifted his hand—though not his hat—in salute. He sat sideways in his saddle to stare at her.

'Yes,' he said, 'she pretty. She very pretty.'

Then he looked at Newbiggin House and the lands around it and he spurred his horse.

Aunt Prue saw him. She met him before Samson or the servants could come near.

'Come into the house,' Aunt Prue whispered. 'Use the front door.' Her face was blotched with excitement.

Archie followed her.

'The house gone down bad, ma'am,' he said, gazing at it. 'Still got that crack in the wall. Jesus!'

'That don't signify.'

'If this was mine——'

'Yes!'

'If this was mine I would give it a lick of paint. Look.' He crumbled a bit of the veranda between his fingers.

'You too stupid, Archie.'

'She take me for no-good trash,' Archie said. He grinned. 'I guess she not wrong neither.'

'Come, sit down, Archie. What a long time! What a long time, eh?' said Aunt Prue.

Archie sighed. He was uneasy in Aunt Prue's company. She sat forward in her chair with her hands kneading the seat.

'Would you—would you care for a glass of small port?'

'Never say "no" to that,' he said.

Aunt Prue fetched the broached bottle from the wardrobe floor and glasses from the dining-room.

'This is good port,' she said.

'You been testing it, then, Miss Prue. You always liked a drop.'

'Archie!'

She gave him a glass and a toast.

'Success to our hopes!' she said.

'Success!' he said, and drained the glass.

'Another drop?' she asked, and half filled his glass. 'Now we got to talk quick. She soon come back.'

Archie sighed.

'We got an ally. Well! Just imagine! Mrs. Naunton say Laura never was registered at all, at all.'

'What? Never?'

'Not to her knowledge.'

'You don't know yourself?'

'Laura keep her business private, Archie. She never liked nobody poking about in her business. She never told me.'

'Then we is—you must be the owner of Newbiggin!'

'Ssh!' she said. 'Not so loud. We got to prove it.'

'No proving there, Prue. You was Prunella Pouyatt. You sitting pretty.'

'You got to help me, Archie. I will make it worth your while. There's plenty here. Plenty for everybody. I'll—I'll see you get your share.'

'And Laura?'

'Laura?' she sniffed. 'Archie, you don't know how she treat me like no-good dirt. Never. She can help herself the next best way.'

'But, Prue! Laura good to you. Didn't she do you a good turn and keep you here when you didn't have nowhere to lie your head?'

'Pshaw! A servant was all I was. Now, I can get my own back. Last week I ask for a little help—on account of Matt, my husband, fall off the house and cracked his head, the fool—and Dorcas's boy had to wait till nightfall before she gave him two and sixpence, two and sixpence to get rid of him. Laura will have to crawl to me.'

'You is a real business lady, Miss Prue. Just fancy!'

'It's in the family,' said Prue. 'Another drop of port, Archie? No? Quite sure? Well, just another little glass for myself, then.'

To our future, Archie. I always know you were in my future somewhere.'

Archie laughed.

'You is a caution, Prue,' he said.

'All you got to do, Archie, is this,' said Prue. She was nearly light-headed with the wine and the praise. She talked at Archie for nearly an hour. When he left, she spread herself over her bed to rest. She was tired.

Laura left Newbiggin House chiefly to escape Aunt Prue. Laura's instinct was to go as far away as possible from Aunt Prue's voice. It was this which led her to discover the pile of husked coconuts at Water Bottom. She rode from tree to tree. Under several were little mounds of coconuts with their husks nearby. Laura heard the rain of nuts falling from a distant tree. She galloped over to it.

'Who uppa tree?' she yelled.

'Me, ma'am,' a faint voice answered.

Laura craned her neck to see between the branches and bunches of coconuts.

'Who "me"?' she shouted.

'Me! Mose, ma'am.'

'Come down, Mose.'

She drummed on her saddle with her fingers while Mose rapidly walked down the tree like a lizard.

'Why you pick coconuts, Mose?'

Mose's chin trembled, for he was a nervous man.

'You is no thief, Mose. Why you do this?'

'No Mass Levi say pick them, mistress.'

'Levi? You sure? How many you pick already?', she asked.

Mose added his fingers.

'Me can't count, ma'am.'

'Mose, go and bring Levi here.'

'Yes'm,' Mose said. He ran away as fast as he could. He did not like the look in her eyes.

Levi Jones was taking up work. He had a busy day before him. Today, he commanded respect, for his accounts book carried him. The accounts book was of an impressive size. It had red edges. Behind each of Levi's ears there was a pencil with a needle point. Levi traced over the pencil writing when he went home at

night with pen and ink. At these times his woman admired him from afar, because if she so much as sneezed or belched or breathed hard Levi would rise and box her down.

Mose met him sauntering along the road.

'Mass Levi,' said Mose.

'Catch you breath, Mose,' Levi said.

'Miss Laura down Water Bottom.'

'Um-um.'

'She want you come quick.'

'Mc can't come now, Mose; me taking up work.'

'You don't see Miss Laura, Mass Levi. You better hurry.'

Levi was already hurrying. He had a frown on his face. Perhaps he should not put himself down for two shilling more, after all.

Archie White, riding away from Newbiggin, came up behind Levi. He rode beside him for a while.

'Didn't I see you last night?' Archie said.

'Yes—sah.'

'You work for Newbiggin?'

'Yes—sah.'

'What's matter with you? You stammer?'

'No.'

'Work hard,' said Archie White, flicking Levi with his whip.

Levi shouted and danced. Mose laughed and so did Archie White.

While Laura waited she broke open two of the dried coconuts and drank the water. It was hot and she was thirsty.

'Me come, Miss Laura,' said Levi.

Laura did not look up.

'Tell me about them coconuts, Levi,' she said.

'Yes'm,' said Levi.

'Go on, I am listening.'

'Yes'm,' said Levi.

Suddenly she brought up her whip and slapped the accounts book from his hands.

'Who give you permission to pick my coconuts, Levi? Answer me.'

Levi stepped back. Mose lifted the ledger and began to study it.

'Permission, ma'am? No Miss Prue say pick the coconuts, ma'am.'

'Miss Prue tell you that?' said Laura, looking into the coconut tree.

'Yes'm. You didn't know, Miss Laura?'

'Of course I know, Levi. Only—only it slipped my memory.'

'Yes'm,' whispered Levi. Laura mounted her horse again and turned to go.

'Miss Laura!' said Levi.

Laura looked back.

'Before Missis dead she promise me—she promise me another two-three shilling a week, ma'am.'

Laura looked at Levi a little longer, and he wrapped his arms round his shoulders.

'Pshaw,' Laura spat at him and galloped away.

She did not waste any time getting back to Newbiggin. She called Aunt Prue. Aunt Prue hid the slab of cake under her pillow and the glass of wine under her bed.

'Here——' Aunt Prue choked. Laura walked into the room and waited until the coughing stopped. She flipped her skirt with her whip.

'You thief!' said Laura.

'Thief!' whispered Prue. She sat down on the bed and eased the wineglass farther underneath it. There was a tinkle as the glass fell and broke.

Quickly Laura was on her knees.

'Wine!' she said.

'It's—I wasn't feeling too good this morning, Laura. You must know how it is? Sometimes a woman needs a—needs——'

'Don't whine, Aunt Prue. You don't have to tell me what you don't have. I know. You don't got no pride. Oh, I is right down ashamed to own you for my relative. You behave worse than any—any nigger I know. Do you think anyone but you would come here and walk about owning the land and giving orders to my servants? No.'

'But it's my duty——'

'It's your duty to keep your place, Aunt Prue, or it's go you will go right back to Matt to scratch your living together.'

'I got you there, Laura. You can't turn me out.'

'Yes. I can and will if you pick one more of my coconuts.'

'Your coconuts—Levi tell you, then? Wait till I see him!'

'Levi won't take no more orders from you. Just leave my goods alone. Keep your hands off them.'

'All right, all right. I wasn't going to say nothing, yet. I told Archie I said I wouldn't say nothing yet. But you drive me to it, Laura. I wouldn't say nothing yet.'

'What?'

'The way you go on over this tumbledown house. Pshaw. You think I don't hear about you—what happen to you the other day?'

'Pick up the broken glass, Aunt Prue. And don't try nothing more behind my back.'

'And how you expect me to run this huge house without money? I got to get money somehow.'

'First of all, you not running the house.'

'Oh no! I suppose you are?'

'You don't need no money. And if you want a favour, ask me,' said Laura. 'Now who was the man come here?'

'Nobody don't come here,' said Aunt Prue.

Laura shrugged.

'A little wrinkled man,' she said, 'eating nuts.'

'Nobody don't come here,' said Aunt Prue.

★ ★ ★

Laura wandered about the banana walk for the rest of the day. She did not, however, stray far from home. She sat in the shade of a guango tree where she could see the drive. Rain brought down the night and drove her indoors.

Aunt Prue retired early, while there were yet few tumblebugs roasting inside the lamp globe. Laura kept vigil, not, as the servants thought, for her mother, but for Neil. He was living. When she could hear Aunt Prue's snores no longer she went through her bedroom door into the night. She moved among the sodden banana trash in the turkey pen. Suddenly she began to cry. She cried noisily, with her mouth wide open.

From the kitchen Sarah and Berta could not see her since Laura's clothes were black. Sarah sighed deeply.

'I know Miss Laura going to break down long time,' she said to Berta.

The tin lamp gave but a flickering light. Ellen and Lucy had already gone.

'Me not going stay no longer, Miss Sarah,' said Berta. 'The mistress won't rest still without there is a nine-night service. Nobody don't even sit up to keep out the spirit.'

'You too 'fraid again, Berta,' said Sarah.

'Miss Laura better look out Missis don't come back for her!' Berta said.

Sarah sucked her teeth.

'You can go home, Berta,' said Sarah.

'Me going down the meeting. Good night, Miss Sarah.'

Berta ran out into the courtyard.

'Berta! Berta! Wait. Me coming too,' called Sarah.

Berta reappeared.

'You don't 'fraid, Miss Sarah?' she asked.

Sarah slammed the kitchen door and followed Berta to the meeting. They enjoyed themselves that night, and Berta went into a trance, fell upon the ground before the preacher and spoke in unknown tongues. She frothed profusely. Sarah led her behind the Chinaman's shop to douse her in water, but when she found the armour-bearer and the visitor of that day to Newbiggin, she hastily retreated with Berta.

It was the first time that Berta had received the Holy Spirit and spoken in unknown tongues. Next day she strutted about as if she owned Newbiggin.

Samson came to gape at her.

'So, you catch the Spirit?' he said.

'Amen,' said Lucy and Ellen.

'Hallelujah!' Sarah said.

'You see the Archangel?' asked Samson.

'I was saved,' said Berta.

'Hallelujah!' they said.

'Today, she rise from the dead,' said Berta.

They looked uneasily from one to another.

'Is the third day,' Samson said.

They coughed.

Sarah started to peel bananas. Lucy and Ellen took buckets and went to fetch water.

'I don't feel good, Miss Sarah,' said Berta.

'Is saved you save,' Sarah said, 'but is work you will work. Go and sweep out the house.'

'Yes, Miss Sarah.'

Samson sat on the mortar.

'Get off me mortar, Samson,' Sarah said. 'That mortar belong to my behind.'

Samson went to the coach-house.

By dusk they had all left Newbiggin. The drums were throbbing in the village. The singing had started. Perhaps Berta would go into another trance and foam again.

Aunt Prue locked herself into her bedroom. Presently the silence of the house frightened her. She took her lamp and went to Laura in the drawing-room.

Laura was sitting on a chair before the door. She was completely dressed in black—except for the sapphire brooch in the lace at her neck. Her hands were folded in her lap. She made no movement when Aunt Prue spoke.

'You mind if I set with you a bit?' laughed Aunt Prue. Laura frightened her. 'It's sort of lonesome in this big house.'

Aunt Prue put her lamp on the piano under the silhouettes of Laura's ancestors.

'Listen to them. Enough to scare devils. But I expect that's the reason. Spirits, you know. Your mother. She was a harsh woman to deal with.'

Laura turned to look at Aunt Prue. Her hair gleamed with grooming. Aunt Prue tittered.

'Don't say evil of the dead! I know that, Laura—especially on the third day.'

Aunt Prue pulled her shawl over her nightgown.

'“On the third day He rose again from the dead.” That was—that was the whole meaning of Christ coming, eh, Laura? He rose again from the dead.'

Laura walked out of the room. She unbolted her bedroom door and walked down to the turkey pen. She could no longer deny it. Neil was not coming, not now. Perhaps he would never come. She went into the banana walk and let her feet carry her. She walked for a long time before she realized that a woman walked with her. Laura stopped.

'Who you?' Laura asked.

'Come! He call you,' the woman said, moving off again.

Laura went with her, since any direction tonight was the right one. Once a twig tore at her skirt. She stopped to free it, then walked on. It was dark.

The woman clapped her hands. Laura stopped. A tree approached her. The woman melted away. The tree chanted.

'You no heary what me say?
You no heary what me say?
Watch out!
Watch out!
You got a sarpent,
Watch out.
You got a sarpent
A-sleep,
A-sleep in you' bosom.
You got a sarpent asleep in you' bosom
Watch out
Watch out.

'You no heary what me say?
You no heary what me say?
There is a monkey
Chewing nuts
Want shirt
There is a monkey chewing nuts want shirt.
Watch out.
Watch out.
Chi-ju-ju speak.'

Laura was no longer dreaming, but she was growing in the ground. Before her eyes the tree dissolved. Laura saw that it was no longer there. Her heart hammered. She was afraid. Laura could not tell where she was.

'Who is it? Who there?' she called. She ran a little and took two steps.

She heard the chant ringing in her ears. The bush moved. There was no bush.

'I am lost,' she said.

Her ears opened and the chant ran out of them. Now she heard

the river. She ran to its bank and turned to follow it. Presently she came to the path leading from Newbiggin House. Laura raced along it. She stopped at the edge of the trees. She looked at the mass of Newbiggin House. Laura raised her arms over her head and wept.

Samson saw the apparition thicken the darkness as it glided. 'The mistress,' he whispered. It was the third night.

Chapter Twelve

Laura was very subdued next day. A little rational thought had soon explained the 'talking tree' to her. Chi-ju-ju was the Lobeah man. She was mortified at the memory of the incident.

Aunt Prue was feeding her long belly when Laura saw her next morning. Laura sat down at the breakfast table and bit her lip.

'Good morning, Laura,' stressed Aunt Prue.

'Aunt Prue, you ever seen an Lobeah man?'

'Oh, my God! No. What you mean?'

'I mean—oh, I don't know.'

Laura sipped some coffee. Sarah, Berta, Ellen and Lucy peeped at her through a crack in the door.

'None never appear to you?' Laura persisted.

'Certainly not!'

'Well—those predictions and things. They don't know nothing really?'

Aunt Prue clasped her hands.

'Don't know about the predictions. But—you ever hear of Wa-jun-go?'

'No.'

'Well, Wa-jun-go was a very clever Lobeah man. Done more mischief than any dozen societies together. He used to kill people and sick them and make them love and hate and fall into fits and everything. Till one day—one day he fell out with his confidential secretary.'

'What happened, Aunt Prue?'

'One day he gave his armour-bearer, his confidential secretary, something and she died. Dead as a door-post.'

'What he give her, Aunt Prue?'

'Ground-up glass. They say she was all blood—all blood. He was a real clever man.'

'Oh!' Laura said.

'Of course, they hang him.'

'I'm—I'm going outside.'

Laura went into the courtyard.

The women whispered in the kitchen with Samson.

'Me old. Old—old,' he said.

'Tell me again, Samson,' Lucy said.

'I was just passing the coach-house,' said Samson, 'when what? Lawd-me-God-oh! Me eye just go down the back yard. They don't see nothing for it dark—it dark so till! Me just going 'way when what? Me see it. Me see it. If I live to two hundred, two hundred and fifty year old . . .'

He paused and challenged the women with a look.

'Go on, Samson,' said Lucy.

'Yes, Mass Samson,' said Berta.

Berta, he remembered, had got the Holy Ghost.

'If I live to—to two hundred then I won't forget it till I dead!'

'Yes, Mass Samson,' cried Berta.

'Not till I dead.'

He sopped some bread in his tin of coffee and sucked it into his mouth.

'I was just going 'long—not doing nobody nothing—when! Me see it. Me see it.'

They all looked outside the door to where Miss Laura examined the wall.

'What you see, Mass Samson?' said Berta.

'Mistress,' said Samson.

There was silence while Sarah pretended to be scrubbing a pan. She did not bang it once.

'The third night he rise from the dead,' said Berta with the authority of one who had received preferential treatment.

'Amen!' they all said except Sarah.

'It just rise up, man. I could see right through it, as clear as

clear. It had a light inside it, man, what light it up like a firefly. It flit. And hop. It cry. "My child! My child! My orphan child!" And wailed so you could tell—if I didn't recognize it—that it was a dead soul.'

'You lie, eh, Samson?' Sarah said, banging the pan.

'Is not lie me lie, Miss Sarah.'

'My child! My child! My orphan child! Pshaw!' Sarah said.

'Well—perhaps . . .' Samson said.

Sarah sucked her teeth.

'I can show you the very spot me see it——'

'Where you hear it wail and cry and howl and hop and flit and light up! How nobody else don't see it?' asked Sarah.

'Missis appear to me.'

'Pshaw!'

The women followed Samson eagerly to view the spot. When he located it, they found it disappointing and said so. Presently Sarah had to go to feed the dills. She took the chance to pass the same spot. If Sarah had looked for footprints she would have found them. But she knew quite well that duppies had no weight.

★ ★ ★

Levi called Laura three times before she heard him.

'What you staring at, Levi?' she asked.

'You feel sick, Miss Laura, me will go 'way,' Levi said.

'What you want?'

'Zaccariah find one disease banana tree, Miss Laura.'

'Disease? You sure?'

'Zacci know then, Miss Laura.'

'You go and look at it yourself, Levi?' asked Laura.

'Pshaw, Miss Laura! Me don't got to. Nobody don't know disease banana like Zacci.'

'All the same, Levi, you don't want to take Zacci's word for it. You is the foreman, Levi.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'You know what to do with disease banana, Levi?'

'Yes, Miss Laura. Missis just chop it down and leave it.'

'You don't have to tell me, Levi. I know myself. Where this tree?'

Levi set off walking. Laura followed.

'Where we got some more disease, Levi?'

'Same place, Miss Laura. Missis find one disease banana same place, ma'am.'

'And it come back?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Laura looked thoughtful. She was not afraid of the disease. There was little of it on Newbiggin lands.

They found Zekie and Zaccariah having a smoke under a pimento tree. Levi kicked them both and they rose slowly to their feet. Levi looked ready to use his cutlass on them.

'You don't see Miss Laura, you lazy niggers?' he shouted. He looked at Miss Laura and switched on his teeth in a grin. The men pawed the ground. Smoke trickled from their pockets.

'You find a disease banana, Zaccariah?' asked Laura.

Zaccariah pointed his lips behind them.

'Come show me, then. If it is a disease—when I see it—you must cut down the tree. We must do the right thing.'

They followed Zaccariah as he slouched along. Zekie fell out and disappeared behind a tree to finish his smoke. Laura stumbled into a filled-in trench and Zaccariah grabbed her up swiftly in his arms. She fought to free herself.

'You all right, Miss Laura?' Levi asked.

'Of course,' Laura said. She was angry. 'But that's no thanks to you, Levi. Look how these trenches filled in? Why don't you keep them clear?'

'Me was going to ask you 'bout them next week, Miss Laura,' he said.

Laura heard Zaccariah breathing against her neck and was afraid to look back.

'See the tree here, Miss Laura,' said Zaccariah.

Laura looked at it. She stamped around the tree, but it seemed no different from the other trees.

'Yes,' she said. 'Chop it down, Zaccariah. We don't want no disease here. Where the other one was, Levi?'

'Here, Miss Laura,' said Zaccariah. His arm hugged a young tree.

'Chop it down. Chop it down, Levi.'

'But, Miss Laura,' said Levi, 'the mistress never——'

'Who you working for, Levi? Me or the dead mistress? I say

chop it down. Take your arms off it, Zaccariah. If I want to chop it down I will chop it down.'

'Chop it down, Zacci,' said Levi.

Laura wrenched Levi's cutlass from him. She ran to the young tree. It shone with health. She slashed the cutlass into its trunk. The cutlass buried itself and refused to shift. Stain bled from the slash. Laura pulled. Zaccariah reached across her and jerked the cutlass free. He held it to Laura, blade first.

'What I want with it, Zaccariah? Do what I say. Chop it down.'

Zaccariah's cutlass swung in a bright sweep through the air and through the tree trunk.

'And that one. And that one . . .' Laura said.

'But, Miss Laura . . .' said Levi.

'And that one. We don't want no more trouble here, Zaccariah. No more disease. You hear me, Levi? No more.'

'But, Miss Laura . . .' Levi said.

'Don't answer back, Levi,' said Laura.

'Me not, Miss Laura.'

'You is.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura started for home rapidly.

She wanted to run away, but did not know why. Part way home, she stopped and called to Levi.

'I don't feel good,' she whispered to herself.

'You want me, Miss Laura?' Levi asked. A smile chased itself round his mouth. He could not understand Miss Laura today.

'I don't want that Zaccariah up near Newbiggin.'

'Zaccariah, Miss Laura?'

'Zaccariah. Never!'

Laura stumbled forward with Levi following.

'You don't want Zaccariah come up Newbiggin, Miss Laura?'

They reached the edge of the banana trees.

'My roof wash 'way, Miss Laura. Missis was gwine give me a new roof, Miss Laura. Real shingles, Miss Laura. It only got thatch.'

Laura stopped. Levi waited.

'I don't want Zaccariah Johnston near Newbiggin,' said Laura. She left Levi, his lips hanging, and charged with her head down into Newbiggin courtyard.

She saw the buggy and pair ready in the courtyard. A rug lay on the seat. She shook her head to find the reason for it.

'I must be hungry. Yes. Is hungry I am—hungry,' Laura said. She staggered past Samson and went into the house. She was sweating. Sarah came and stood beside her.

'You want something, Miss Laura?' said Sarah.

Sarah listened to her breathing. She ran to the kitchen.

'Ellen, go turn down Miss Laura bed. She got fever, man. She red so—till!'

Ellen hurried to her task. Sarah returned to Laura. She slipped her hands under Laura's arms and lifted her.

'Come, Miss Laura, me get you to bed. You roasting.'

'I don't—I don't 'fraid of him, at all, at all. Not afraid of one of them. Not Wa-jun-go, Wa-go-jun, whatever it is. Not one. Don't 'fraid of not one. It's hungry—I hungry.'

'That's right, Miss Laura.'

'Not 'fraid, not one of them. Don't want Zaccariah, don't want—'

'That's right, Miss Laura,' said Sarah.

'What you doing, Sarah?' Laura said, suddenly seeing her bed.

'I putting you to bed, Miss Laura. You burning up with fever.'

'Fever? I don't got no fever. I don't 'fraid of anything. Not fever, not anything.'

'That's right, Miss Laura.'

Aunt Prue went into Laura's room. She was wearing spurs. Laura saw them and began to cackle.

'She got fever, ma'am,' said Sarah.

'You look bad, Laura,' Aunt Prue said.

'Nothing wrong. Nothing,' Laura said.

Aunt Prue was pulling on her gloves. Laura slapped away Sarah's hand. She refused to be put to bed.

'Go away, Sarah,' Laura said. Laura sagged on her bed.

'I am going to Gayle,' said Aunt Prue.

Laura heard. Aunt Prue was making sounds. Laura shook the humming out of her ears into her palm.

'What?' Laura said.

'I got business in Gayle with Lawyer Reid.'

Sarah had not gone far. She now returned with a glass of water and some quinine. Laura was shivering.

'How long she like this?' asked Aunt Prue.

'Just now,' Sarah said.

'Look after her,' said Aunt Prue.

Sarah went to the back door and spat.

'Where's Aunt Prue?' asked Laura.

'She gone to Gayle, Miss Laura,' said Sarah.

'Gone to Gayle. What business you got with Lawyer Reid, Aunt Prue. I heard you say you got business with Lawyer Reid.'

'She rambling,' said Sarah to Ellen.

'Aunt Prue! Aunt Prue! Lawyer Reid don't want to see you? It's me. It is me he want to see.'

Laura sprang out of bed and ran to the courtyard. She found Aunt Prue with the reins gathered in her hands.

'Let go, Samson,' said Aunt Prue.

'No. Stop!' Laura shouted.

'Let go, Samson,' said Aunt Prue.

'Where you going, Aunt Prue?' said Laura, rushing at Aunt Prue.

'I going to Gayle to see Lawyer Reid on business. Let go, Samson.'

Laura dragged the rug off Aunt Prue's knees.

'Lawyer Reid wants to see me, not you. What he wants to see you for?'

'Business. Let go the horses, Samson!'

Aunt Prue lashed the horses. They reared, then stood still.

'Come out my buggy,' said Laura. 'Get out. Everything is yours. My horses, my buggy, my coconuts, my clothes! You think I don't know. Get out, Aunt Prue.'

Laura snatched Aunt Prue's foot and tugged it. Aunt Prue kicked Laura. Laura reached into the buggy. She caught Aunt Prue's hand and Aunt Prue tumbled out of the buggy.

'You'll pay for this,' Aunt Prue said.

Laura laughed.

'Turn out the animals, Samson,' she said. Aunt Prue had disappeared.

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Laura woke up to find herself in bed. Her head was quite clear. In a moment she remembered some of the things which had happened that morning. Laura dressed herself again. She felt cool with sweat. But she knew that she had to get to Gayle.

'Sarah!' she called.

'Here, Miss Laura,' said Sarah. She came in off the back step.

'Sarah, a messenger come here today from Gayle? From Lawyer Reid?'

'Well, I don't know, Miss Laura. A man—a rider did come here.'

'When?'

'When you down the bush with Levi, ma'am.'

'He didn't say what he wanted?'

'He don't tell me nothing, Miss Laura. He only laugh. He go and talk to Miss Prue, Miss Laura.'

'Miss Prue?'

'Yes, ma'am. She—she give him a glass of wine.'

'That's it!' said Laura. She clapped her hands. 'Where Miss Prue?'

'She gone to Gayle, Miss Laura,' said Sarah.

'The man! What the man look like, Sarah? A little monkey. . . .'

'Lawks-me-God-oh! Him look just like monkey, Miss Laura.'

'Chewing nuts.'

'Yes, Miss Laura. How you know?'

'Tell Samson get the buggy ready. I going to Gayle.'

'But, Miss Laura, you sick.'

'Get the buggy ready. Quick! "You got a serpent in your bosom." I—I wonder. "There is a monkey chewing nuts want shirt." No! It's not possible!'

Laura walked to the back door and stared outside at nothing.

'Go back 'to bed, Miss Laura,' said Sarah.

'You still here, Sarah?'

'No'm.'

Sarah lifted her skirt and ran to find Samson.

'Chi-ju-ju,' said Laura. 'It's not—it's not possible. No! I must go to Gayle see what she up to. All those threats.'

Sarah came back to Laura, rubbing her wrists together.

'Samson must go with you to Gayle, Miss Laura.'

'Must?'

'You sick, Miss Laura.'

'Get me a hat, Sarah.'

'Parson Bickett come, Miss Laura.'

'Where's that hat?'

'Say he must see you. I put him in the drawing-room, Miss Laura.'

Laura adjusted her hat and went into the drawing-room. Parson was reading from the family Bible. He had the Bible balanced on his hands.

'Howdy-do, Parson Bickett?' Laura said.

Parson bounced round.

'Miss Pettigrew!'

They shook hands.

'I won't ask you to sit. As you see, I am just going out.'

'But I understood you to be out of your—to be very ill, Miss Pettigrew.'

'There's lots might like to think that, Parson. But as you see—I am clothed and in my right mind.'

'I assure you, I had no intention of—that is, I did not mean to imply . . .'

'Who told you I was sick, Parson?'

'Mrs. Burton herself. I met her along the road. She seemed in rather a hurry. But she stopped for a word with me.'

Laura snorted.

'Oh, please, Miss Pettigrew. She has your interest at heart. Completely at heart, I do assure you. She is worried about you.'

'She better worry about herself—if what I guess prove to be so.'

'May I ask what your guess is?' said Parson Bickett. With a finger between two buttons he made a bellows of his jacket.

'Aunt Prue up to no good.'

'Ah. Just so. Just so. She told me something of this, Miss Pettigrew—Miss Laura.'

He smiled.

'In your hour of great trial Mrs. Burton was with you.'

'You wrong. I was alone. I got nobody with me. I don't want nobody.'

'But you do. It is dangerous to think that you need nobody. We all do. We need someone. We need God. God with us. God in us. We need His salvation and His understanding.'

Laura was silent.

'He is kind to all of us. Will listen to us, at any hour of the day, if we but call upon Him. Kneel with me. Let us kneel together, Miss Laura, and pray for guidance, and He will send it to you.'

'Thank you, Parson, but I know the way. I know what I got to do.'

'Without God's help and the guidance of your aunt?'

'Particularly without Aunt Prue's guidance. Sarah! The buggy ready?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'Thanks for calling, Parson. I sure it was kindly meant. But you don't understand. You don't live on earth with human beings. You stay in Heaven so long you lost touch.'

'That is—that is blasphemy!'

'That is sense. Goodbye, Parson. Pray for me if you like. I never found it done me no good.'

'This is—this is impossible! I will never believe it!'

'Oh, Lord!' said Laura.

'There you are? However small, you prayed. "O Lord"—a cry from your soul. You cannot repudiate God with your upbringing. It's like casting your skin. However you try, the same skin will come again, same as before.'

Laura trudged down the steps with Parson behind her.

'It's going to rain again,' said Laura.

'Rain?' said Parson. He was baffled. 'But rain too is Divine. You can relate everything to the Divine. The sun rises and shows us the wonders of the world: the brooks and rivers, the hills and mountains; the jasmine and the rose. The night is Divine. It brings the calm, the repose to refresh the soul. It brings sleep and softness and——'

'Love,' said Laura, mounting the buggy and taking the reins in her hands.

Parson blushed. He looked at Samson. Samson looked between the horse's ears and chewed a corner of his lip.

'Love is of all, Divine,' said Parson. 'Love transcends all.'

'Well, I know you know these things, Parson,' said Laura. She lashed the horses and the buggy rolled out of the courtyard.

Parson followed the trail of dust with his eyes for a while. Then he went to his own buggy and climbed stiffly into his seat. He looked up and the group of servants. Their faces were expressionless, their attitudes threatening. His buggy went away, carrying his body.

Laura met Neil along the road. She knew it was he long before

she could distinguish his features. She whipped the horses, yet drew the reins. Her eyes rested on the ground.

'Stop, Laura, stop!' Neil said, laughing.

The buggy stopped. Laura smoothed the gloves on her hands.

'Don't tell me you don't see me—stranger.'

'Stranger!' said Laura, and shut her lips.

'Stranger,' said Neil. He leaned over and kissed her ear. She swung towards him.

'Don't touch me! Don't touch me! I hate you! I never want to see you again.'

She shook the reins.

'No, you don't, Laura,' said Neil. 'You don't hate me. Confess now if you haven't been looking out for me. Come on. Confess.'

'What would I be looking for you for?' Laura said at last.

Neil laughed.

'You know. You don't need me to tell you. You missed me.'

Laura remained silent.

'Stubbornness never did look well on you, Laura,' he said.

'Did you get permission to speak to me? At the funeral I saw how your mother drew you on one side whenever you came near me. You don't think I is a fool. And I always thought, I always thought . . .'

'Don't cry, Laura. You talking rot and you know that, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' Laura sniffed.

'As a matter of fact I did come round to Newbiggin the other day.'

'You didn't!'

'I did. But I heard you and Prue Burton rowing. Yap, yap, yap! Can't put two women together in a house they don't yap, yap, yap.'

'I didn't know you come!'

'I slipped away right quick, let me tell you. All that yap, yap, yap.'

'Anyway, it doesn't matter,' Laura said. 'Goodbye. Goodbye, Neil.'

She flicked the reins sufficiently to cause the horses to flick their tails.

'All this goodbye. You will never say "Goodbye" to me, Laura. We too tied up in one another. You need me like air.'

'The way you puff yourself up! You think I am just like all the others. I know! But you wrong. I don't care whether I never see you again, Neil. You hear me. You can go to that Prudence. See how pretty she is! And all that money! I bet Busha MacKenzie is just rolling in money. Tell me—tell me, Neil. Do they eat their food off gold plate? Just the thing to please you. Well, you can go to Prudence. You can take all the women you want. See if I care. See if I would keep watch for you. Break my heart and waste my life? For you? Never, never! Don't never speak to me again. Because, because I won't—I won't answer. That's my last word, Neil. Goodbye. I'm not speaking to you again.'

Laura lashed the horses and galloped away before he could move. Neil clicked his tongue. He never believed Laura could be so jealous.

Laura could not see the bottom of the ford when she rushed through it. It was covered by a swirl of rusty water. The air was chill when it moved, though the day was still and hot. Before long she knew that the rains which had been brewing in the sky for days would gush over the countryside. The birds were quiet. The stones rattled under the buggy wheels.

A straggle of wattle-and-daub huts began. Pigs and goats munched around front steps. Farther on a rose bush or a ramona tree replaced the animals, and wooden shacks with tin roofs jostled together.

Laura had arrived in Gayle. In a few moments she went past the courthouse and lock-up, the Chinaman's shop and the bank. It began to rain. She started to shiver. She drew up to Lawyer Reid's office and stopped. Laura jumped from the buggy, and before she reached the shelter of the veranda she was wet though.

The first thing she saw was her horse tied to the veranda rail. She looked round at the people waiting to see the lawyer. A man came out and bowed to her.

'Miss Pettigrew,' he said.

'You is Lawyer Reid's clerk?'

He bowed. 'I want to see the lawyer, at once.'

'Will you come this way, please, Miss Pettigrew. Lawyer is with a client.'

Laura stamped her foot.

'What client? I want to see Lawyer Reid now. I am his client.'

‘Yes, Miss——’

The door behind Laura opened and Aunt Prue stepped out. She put out her hand to Laura while a smile trickled backwards and forwards over her lips. Archie White laughed.

‘So this Miss Laura, eh? Well, well! You is grown up. Quite grown up, eh?’

Laura turned her back on his hand.

‘Who is your companion, Aunt Prue?’

‘The lawyer will see you, Miss Pettigrew,’ said the clerk.

‘White. Archie White, at your service. I knew your mother well,’ said Archie.

‘Very well,’ Aunt Prue said.

‘Lawyer will see you now, Miss Pettigrew,’ said the clerk.

Laura stared at Aunt Prue. Suddenly she laughed.

‘It raining, and it getting worse. Tie up my horse to the back of my buggy,’ said Laura.

‘Why, Laura, thank you. After all, we going the same place, eh, Archie?’ Aunt Prue said.

Laura laughed. She was light-headed.

‘Tie it up good,’ Laura said.

‘I will do that myself, Miss Laura,’ Archie White said.

Laura turned to follow the clerk, then stopped. She looked slowly past Aunt Prue to the door where a rim of damp was penetrating the room. Laura gave Aunt Prue a florin.

‘Go over the Chiny shop get me some lace, Aunt Prue,’ said Laura. Without waiting for an answer she dashed into Lawyer Reid’s presence.

Lawyer Reid was standing by a window smoking a cigar and looking into the street. When Laura entered he put the cigar in a tray and came to meet her. He took both Laura’s hands and led her to a chair.

‘Miss Pettigrew!’ he said. ‘On a day like this, you should be at home. I understood that you were ill.’

‘My Aunt Prue, no doubt.’

‘Yes.’

Lawyer Reid went back to stare out of the window.

‘I cannot help wondering if I did right. If I did right,’ he said.

‘Lawyer Reid! I can trust you. My mother always trusted you. I know that,’ said Laura.

Lawyer Reid patrolled the window.

'Between your mother and myself, Miss Pettigrew, there was always the deepest respect—the deepest mutual respect and understanding. I would like you to know, now and at any time, that such a long association as has existed between your mother and myself is not easily broken down. I know your situation. I shall do all I can for you. My first duty is to you.'

'Thank you, Lawyer Reid. I am glad you think so highly of us. That will make what I got to find out easier,' said Laura. She twisted a handkerchief in her hand. 'Lawyer Reid, what going on between Aunt Prue and that man White? I swear I hear that name before.'

Lawyer Reid punched his palm with his fist.

'I will answer your question with another, Miss Pettigrew. You were born on the 25th of December, 1900.'

'Yes.'

'You have a birth certificate?'

'Birth certificate? I don't know. I never needed one.'

'But you must have seen it?'

'Oh, no! Mother kept all her papers private. Why do you ask?'

'Because if you have one, find it. Find it quickly, and bring it to me. I don't doubt that this is a diabolical plot simply to distress you. But—two can play at the same game. Remember, Miss Pettigrew—find that certificate and bring it to me. We have to defeat time. For though I am positive of your integrity, time could ruin it.'

Lawyer Reid seated himself before Laura and lifted a ruler.

'I don't understand you at all, at all,' said Laura.

'It would be better if you never did.'

He dropped the ruler and stood up.

'Goodbye, Miss Pettigrew. The rain is slackening for a bit. I would ask you to spend the night, but my wife—you are not well, are you? Once you are safe across the ford, all will be well.'

He took Laura's hand and led her to the door. Before she had answered him, Laura found herself on the other side of his door.

'Well,' she said, not at all certain that her visit had accomplished anything. Lawyer Reid's evasiveness worried her.

The rain had slackened very slightly, but Laura, acting on the assumption that she was already wet, dashed to her buggy and

drove sedately past the Chinaman's shop. Aunt Prue stood in the doorway flapping her arms. She had a small parcel in one hand. When Laura turned the corner, she drove behind the courthouse and waited.

In a few moments Archie White galloped past. Laura waited. She made sure that the horse Aunt Prue had ridden was well secured behind. It was. She heard a horse walking towards her. She peeped over the back of the buggy. It was Archie White returning. He rode past with a puzzled expression. He did not see her.

When Laura heard the sound of his horse's hooves no more she guided the buggy slowly from its hiding-place and along the road for Newbiggin. The ford was heavy with water. At first the horses refused to cross, but little by little Laura urged them into it. When she reached the other side she slumped back with weariness. She dozed. She dozed for a long time. Chariots swarmed over her and she was the flood, full of stolen things. A horse neighed and reared at her. On its back was a monkey gibbering to a serpent. The serpent wrapped itself around the monkey's neck and its scream woke Laura.

She trembled, but she was cool. It was morning. Not a cloud showed in the sky. It was near and blue. Laura relaxed. A cool cloth moved over her forehead. It was pleasant, but Laura was too tired to find out whose hand moved it. Presently she slept again.



Sarah waited for Miss Laura to wake. She had a good chicken soup thickening on the fire ready to pour into the tureen. The tray was ready with linen and silver and plate of the best. Miss Laura lay with the stillness of death, but Sarah watched with joy a pulse beating in Miss Laura's neck.

Miss Laura had had no doctor. Sarah knew more about healing herbs and amulets than any doctor ever knew. Cautiously she untied the string from Laura's neck and pulled up a small envelope from her night-clothes. Sarah pushed the envelope into her own bosom. It was an oil-o'-well-me and never failed to heal.

Laura opened her eyes. They were like still pools of water. She recognized Sarah at once. Laura did not speak. She twisted her head and looked about.

'I'm hungry,' Laura said.

'Yes, ma'am!' said Sarah.

In one minute Laura was eating heartily. She ate everything.

'You want some more soup, Miss Laura? It strong to death!'

'No, Sarah. I want to get up. I feel quite well again.'

A thought occurred to her.

'How long I been sick?'

'Three-four days, ma'am,' Sarah said.

'Four days! Impossible.'

'No, ma'am. Samson find you and bring you home, ma'am.'

'I had some—ugh! Some horrible nightmares.'

Sarah laughed.

'You scream out now and then, Miss Laura.'

Laura tried to rise, but fell back.

'I weak as a cat!' she said.

There was a scuffle at the drawing-room door.

'What's that?' Laura asked.

'Them nigger women, ma'am. Clear out!' shouted Sarah to the servants.

Next day Laura got out of bed and dressed. Apart from a little lightness in her legs, she felt well. Sarah was her constant shadow. Suddenly Laura remembered Aunt Prue.

'Sarah,' Laura said, 'where is Aunt Prue?'

'Miss Prue, Miss Laura? She gone home, mistress.'

'You mean—home?'

'Yes, mistress.'

'When was that?'

'Lawd! The day after you came home, Miss Laura. The man bring her home—'

'Yes. Of course.'

'Next day when Dorcas's boy come, she take the tin trunk and go 'way, Miss Laura.'

'Which tin trunk, Sarah?'

'Under Missis's bed, Miss Laura. It full up of things, for when I clearing out the room it was heavy, Miss Laura.'

'All right, Sarah,' Laura said. 'Just leave me here alone. I want to think.'

Laura went to sit on the grass in front of the house. It was still and she was peaceful. She could feel the strength coming back to

her. She slept with her nose in the grass. The ground smelt sweet and moist. Laura was happy. Sarah awoke her. Sarah believed that everything should stop for food.

Laura ate heartily.

'Nobody don't come to see me, Sarah? No messages?'

'No, Miss Laura.'

'No? I—I didn't expect nothing, really.'

Sarah hesitated.

'One letter come for Miss Prue, ma'am.'

'Give it me!'

Sarah fetched it from under the chafing-dish on the sideboard.

'But this don't got no stamp on?'

'No, ma'am. It come from Busha MacKenzie.'

'How you know that?'

'No know me know the boy, Miss Laura.'

Laura longed to see inside. She believed that within was the clue to the mystery being brewed by Aunt Prue and Archie White.

'You can go, Sarah,' she said.

As soon as Sarah went, Laura opened the letter. A pound note fell out of a receipt.

'Received from Mrs. P. Burton 600 mixed seed coconuts.
Total value One Pound (£1) enclosed.'

'R. B. MacKenzie.'

'So!' Laura said. She drummed with her fingers while she thought.

'Sarah! I got you, Aunt Prue.'

'Yes'm.'

'Find Samson. Hitch up the buggy. I got to go to Gayle.'

'But, Miss Laura——'

'Don't argue.'

Laura went to make herself ready. She felt calm. She believed that now she saw the way to do what she wanted to do.

Lawyer Reid had been expecting Laura for several days, so that he was not surprised when his clerk announced her. He noted that she looked drawn and white and hastened to offer her a glass of port. Laura refused it.

'You are keeping well, Miss Pettigrew?' he asked.

'As a matter of fact I only got out of bed yesterday.'

'Dear me! I hope it had nothing to do with your journey home last week?' he said.

'It all helped, I've no doubt. I brought you this to look at. I don't intend doing nothing about it, so it's no good you advise me to,' said Laura. She handed him the envelope with the receipt and money from Busha MacKenzie.

Lawyer Reid glanced at the envelope with contempt and put it on the desk before him. He guessed that it contained the birth certificate.

'I am sorry you did not avail yourself of the offer to spend the night at my home. My wife was very upset when she saw the storm you went home in.'

'That is very gratifying, Lawyer Reid. Would you care to look at the letter I bring?'

He laughed and picked it up.

'It is only a formality, let me assure you. You will remember that I always believed that everything would soon straighten itself out.'

He leaned back in his chair and rested a roll of skin over his collar.

'Your mother was a woman of great character—and strength. She had the courage and the will of a man. I have often said to Mrs. Reid, "If Mrs. Pettigrew were a man—what a man she would make. What a man!" She had the ability, seldom found in a woman, of being able to grasp essentials in a moment. I am relieved that in this very delicate matter you have decided to draw the veil. It would only make talk—and there is nothing more ruinous than talk. Take the case of Mrs. A—I will call her Mrs. A.'

Lawyer Reid strolled over to the window. He rose on his toes. His hands reached beneath his coat and clasped behind him.

'Mrs.—A was a good woman. Respectable family, well to do. Then tragedy struck. There was a child. Forgive me.'

He raised himself on his toes again.

'What has happened to that good woman? Well. You can imagine. Disgrace. Thrown out of the family. But—she was lucky. She found a generous man to marry her.'

'What about that letter, Lawyer Reid.'

He laughed and came to her.

'We lawyers are a talkative fraternity. That is possibly why we are lawyers.'

He sat down to open the letter.

'I cannot tell you of my joy at this conclusion. My faith in your mother has never been stronger. What's this? What's this?'

He jumped up with the receipt in one hand and the money in the other.

'"Six hundred seed coconuts"? Is this a joke? It is very poor one.'

'It's no joke, Lawyer Reid. I found out my Aunt Prue been stealing behind my back. Yes, stealing. I told myself there isn't no other word for it. But as I said, I don't intend to prosecute. She is my family, after all.'

'But this—this—'

'She knows if she wants a pound to come to me. But no. She prefers to do it this way. Maybe because she knows she wouldn't get a pound from me. Maybe that's why.'

'But where is the birth certificate? You realize what this means? I— I—'

'Oh, yes. That's why I come. I want you to stop her being my guardian. I can manage quite well on my own.'

Lawyer Reid threw the receipt and money on the table and looked wildly about.

'Did you bring the certificate, Miss Pettigrew?'

'No. I don't know where it is.'

'But you must produce it. You must find it. I impressed on you the immediate necessity for it. It is your property, Miss Pettigrew, that you are playing fast and loose with.'

'I don't see what my property got to do with my birth certificate?'

'But—good God! Forgive me. If you cannot produce it the land will go to your cousin—and I doubt not to Mr. Archibald White!'

'What!' said Laura, rising to her feet. She felt as if her head would touch the ceiling.

'What's that you say, Lawyer Reid?'

'Mrs. Burton has challenged your possession of Newbiggin, the house, lands, moneys—everything. According to her, since your mother died intestate—'

'Mother wasn't expecting to die!'

'But we all do. We all make provision for it.'

'Aunt Prue can't contest my possession. How can she?'

'She says—you know as I said before that I have every belief in your mother's integrity——'

Lawyer Reid stopped to blow his nose. His face was dark red. Laura waited.

'Every belief. Your mother was a woman of great moral strength.'

'Never mind about the moral strength. What about—Newbiggin?'

'It is, of course, a calumny. I think you will have a case here for defamation of character. . . .'

Lawyer Reid went back to the window and gave Laura a good view of his back.

'If you don't come out with it now, Lawyer Reid, I will burst,' said Laura.

'Mrs. Burton says—but it must be untrue—says . . . I ask you not to believe this.'

'I won't. Just tell me what!'

'Mrs. Burton says you have no birth certificate . . .'

'Is that all?'

'And that she can prove—witnesses, etcetera—that you were not born in wedlock.'

'That's a lie!' said Laura.

The clock ticked in a corner. Laura dropped into her chair.

'I am sure it is,' said Lawyer Reid. 'That is why a birth certificate is so necessary.'

'I will find it. I must get it somewhere. I will find it. You see what I say? Aunt Prue, Cousin Prue, is no more than a thief. A common thief. But I will find it. Do you think she could try this on my mother? Never! Never!'

Laura stood up to go.

'So that's why you kept on about Mother's moral integrity and your faith, etcetera? You shamed to think you got a client with trouble?'

'No. . . .'

'Well, we will see. Aunt Prue done lots to me. But this I won't let her do. Newbiggin is mine. It's my home. Every stone of it.'

The good ones and the rotten ones too. It belongs to me, for I love it and I born in it. It gave me birth. And Prue Burton shall not have it!’

Laura swept up the receipt and the pound and stuffed them into her bag.

‘I will keep this, Lawyer Reid. And I will bring you the proof you don’t think I got.’

‘I’ve sent to make inquiries at——’

‘You don’t need to. Let me tell you what I will do for you. I will do your work for you. I am your client—unless you tell me otherwise. But I will do your work for you so you don’t get soiled with all this—this dirty mess.’

She turned to go.

‘Please give my regards to your wife. It’s a pity she should worry about the like of me—going home in a storm to a fever bed. It saved her trouble, anyhow.’

Laura left the building. She drove her buggy away. She did everything with care, seeing no one. For her eyes wept, without tears. When she arrived at Newbiggin, she sent for Mrs. Morgan, the dressmaker, and ordered three dresses of the deepest mourning.

Chapter Thirteen

Archie White whistled as he rode towards Miss Prue’s house. He peered into the darkness until a point of light appeared. It drew him. He sat sideways in his saddle, dangling one leg. He felt slightly uneasy about this abrupt summons from Miss Prue.

The horse stumbled. Archie pulled it up and began to take notice of his surroundings. There was little to see save a gully on one side and a line of guava trees marking the opposite bank.

‘Come, we get it over with,’ said Archie, spurring the horse. He was near now to the light, which guided yet eluded him. Presently he saw the house and stopped. He gazed at it for a long time before dismounting. Then he laughed.

‘This must Miss Prue house,’ he muttered. He slid off his horse

and tied the bridle to a grapefruit tree. The gate hung off its hinges. Archie White stopped for a while in the gateway to look at the house. He laughed in his throat. He made no secret of his coming, yet no one appeared to greet him. He mounted the veranda and looked into the sitting-room. A chair was rocking itself furiously. It had a brown cushion stopping a hole in the seat.

Archie knocked on the door with his whip.

'That you, Dorcas?' called Miss Prue.

'Miss Prue!' Archie said.

There was silence followed by brisk footsteps.

'Why, Archie, it's you!' said Aunt Prue.

Archie laughed.

'Who else?' he said.

'Come in, come in! Make yourself at home. Well! Fancy, I didn't hear you come at all, at all.'

Archie grinned and sat down. Aunt Prue looked worried. She watched him balancing on the chair and relaxed.

'Perhaps—perhaps you better try this chair, Archie,' she said, pointing to the rocking-chair. Before he could move she seated herself in it.

'You looking well, Miss Prue,' Archie said.

'Oh, Archie, in spite of all the troubles I got? Well, of course, you don't know, do you?'

'Where's your husband Matt?'

'I give him a sixpence and send him to the Chinaman.'

'Oh? Well, well!'

'I got to talk to you in private.'

'You mean—Matt don't know I coming tonight?'

'Of course not, Archie. Why should he? Don't none of his business.'

'Don't it? He don't know about——'

'Sssh!' said Aunt Prue. She tiptoed to the veranda and peered into the darkness.

'That Dorcas! She very inquisitive, you know.'

'How's Matt?'

'He won't get no better, Archie.'

'I am sorry to hear that.'

A cat screamed.

'What for?' said Aunt Prue. 'He's a nonentity.'

'I didn't mean that, Miss Prue.'

'That's all right, Archie. Only—only—a girl gets so she would like a real man to lean on sometimes, though. Matt don't got no better to get better—knock his brains out or no.'

Archie wriggled on his chair as Aunt Prue sniffed into a handkerchief. He cleared his throat.

'I know just how you feel, Archie. I know exactly what you thinking about me. You sick to death of me. Don't trouble to deny it. I know.'

'Lawd, Miss Prue, whatever give you that idea?' said Archie. He needed air. The room was hot and the lantern smoked.

'It's because I don't have no one to lean on for support. I don't got no one to advise me.'

'You got Matt.'

'Matt!'

Aunt Prue jumped from the chair and it moved like a crab across the room.

'Matt don't no use to nobody.'

Archie scratched his head.

'Well, anyhow,' he said at last, 'I don't suppose you send Dorcas's boy to come call me so urgent to talk about Matt.'

'No, I didn't. Archie, I got a letter from Lawyer Reid calling me to Gayle.'

'So! You going? You should go.'

'Of course I should go. I went.'

While Aunt Prue paced the room Archie took out a cigar and stuck it between his teeth. He drew a match across the sole of his shoe. It gave a little explosion which made Aunt Prue jump round.

'You got my permission to smoke, Archie?' she said.

'Sorry, Miss Prue.' He blew out the match.

'Oh, don't bother. Nobody bother about me. They got other matters to attend to. Why should they bother with me? I am nobody, only Prue Burton of Nowhere. You don't know that? Prue Burton of Nowhere!'

'Well, if that's all, Miss Prue, I will be getting along.'

'No. Stay,' said Aunt Prue. She ran to Archie and clutched his hands. 'I don't got no one to help me, Archie, 'cept you.'

'All right, Miss Prue,' Archie said, disentangling his hands.

'You want anything more, Miss Prue?' Dorcas said.

'You been spying, Dorcas,' said Aunt Prue.

'No, Miss Prue.'

Dorcas was clean and young.

'Go get me some matches, Dorcas,' said Archie. He went past Aunt Prue and whispered with Dorcas on the veranda.

'Now then, Miss Prue.'

Aunt Prue's eyes were bright.

'I don't trust that Dorcas. Always spying. I expect she gone to tell Matt what she likes. I bought a pound of salt fish yesterday and it all gone. All of it.'

Archie sighed.

'Miss Prue, you bring me here, all these miles, because you said it's important. I don't intend to get into no more trouble over husbands, even if your Matt is a nonentity.'

'You don't got no call to call Matt Burton a nonentity, Archie White. At least, he does what I tell him.'

'Does he?'

'Yes, Archie, he does. And I don't have to drag on the floor with my knees, neither, for just—for just the simplest something. Not as though it's such a hard thing to do, neither.'

'I don't got you' meaning, Miss Prue,' said Archie.

'All right,' said Aunt Prue, 'I will tell you.'

She reseated herself and began to talk.

'Lawyer Reid wants to make trouble for me. No, no. That's wrong. Not for me. But for you as well. For you and me. Lawyer Reid think himself a clever lawyer. But I know for a fact that he is no better than the rest of us.'

'What trouble, Miss Prue?'

'You want a glass of rum, Archie?'

'What trouble he want make for me, Miss Prue. I am a simple man. I go my way and I don't bother nobody. If Lawyer Reid think he can make trouble for me—then I warn him. I warn him to give it a try.'

Archie grunted. Aunt Prue was not listening to him. She went into the next room and came back with two glasses of rum in her hands. She gave one to Archie.

'Here's success,' she said and drank.

Archie looked at the rum and put it on the floor.

'Why, I can't think what he mean? He can't make no trouble for me?' said Archie.

'Oh, yes, he can. It's over them coconuts.'

'What coconuts?'

'Seems he got hold of some receipt or the other—illegally, for it belong to me, the receipt and the pound. God, I need the money too.'

'I think I don't understand you. You talking of coconuts, receipt and a pound. How I come into that?'

'Well, you is my partner, isn't you? Lawyer Reid says you liable along with me, but he don't advise Laura to prosecute.'

Archie looked dazed.

'Oh, Archie, you don't know how Laura mean. Just like her mother. No difference. You wouldn't credit it, would you? You'd think she was a pickney you could manage. But not her. Hard. Just like her mother was.'

'You telling me—you telling me you thief——'

'Archie! Not that word, please. I only——'

Archie seized Aunt Prue and shook her.

'Tell me if it's thief you thief Miss Laura coconuts now.'

'No, no.'

'The truth.'

'No, no.'

'Before God, if you let me in for any trouble, I will kill you.'

He flung Aunt Prue back into her chair, and went to the door. Aunt Prue picked herself up and ran after him.

'You mustn't hard on me, Archie. I meant well. I—I will tell Lawyer Reid you got nothing to do with it. But, Archie, there is that other business.'

Archie spun the ring on his finger. It caught and flashed the light with each turn.

'Lawyer Reid said we would need more grounds to take Newbiggin off Laura. He said that, at the time she born, Laura was living with her husband. I denied that. You see? You see? You don't think I done right? Archie, don't you? Listen, Archie. If she not living with Pettigrew when Laura born—then it's plain to a fool—Laura don't born in wedlock!'

Aunt Prue shook his arm.

'She don't born in wedlock. If she don't born in wedlock then

all, all is mine. All that house and lands and the buggy and the——'

'I can see it all, Prue. And I hope you and Matt enjoy it.'

'Matt. When I go there you think I want Matt go with me so everybody can laugh at him?'

'Well, he is you husband?'

'Archie, I still need your help. Tell the truth, I need it badly.'

'Well, good night, Miss Prue.'

'No, Archie. Listen. I need a little more help from you. After all, you don't really done all that much yet, have you? And yet, I promise to give you something. You can do with something. Not many of us can afford to turn a good thing down.'

'Miss Prue. I come to a conclusion. It's a conclusion I come to long ago, but I chose because it suited me to forget it.'

'What conclusion you come to Archie?' she asked.

'That you don't think of nothing but yourself. That your ambition to do down Laura is not so much because you know and can prove she illegitimate . . .'

'Proof——'

' . . . but because you hate her, her mother and all the people who live in real houses. That's understandable when you look at this ramshackle wood shack. See how the knots fall out of the wall. Look at them loose boards in the floor. Smell the mice. It's rotten, rotten! Everything is rotten like them chairs without seats and with broken legs. You suffering, Miss Prue, from just plain and simple envy!'

Miss Prue slapped his face. He twisted her arm and she cried.

'You don't like truth? Look at the smoky yellow light from your lantern showing up your bits and pieces. Think what this must look like with the sun on it.'

He shoved her aside.

'You got the truth. You alone know if it's true about Laura. For, before God, I don't know. But—she got guts and she got spunk, and I say, "Good luck to her".'

Archie White trotted down the steps. They rocked under his feet.

'You can't, Archie—you can't just walk off like that. It's more involved than you think. For Lawyer Reid write it down, and I swear to it and I sign it, and you can't get away from it. You—is Laura's father.'

'What?' he roared.

Aunt Prue trembled.

'But what else was I to do, Archie? I got to prove it, he said. Prove it. What is the best way to prove it? That's the only thing I could think of on the spur.'

'I got nothing to do with Laura. Her mother and me—you dirty, filthy, scraggy hen.'

'I will make it worth your while. Two cows. I will give you two cows. You must choose them yourself. And—and——'

'You go to hell!'

'And also you will have a good horse, the very best one. Just tell Lawyer Reid, swear that affidavit——'

'If I wanted to, I couldn't. And I don't want to. You see, I couldn't possibly be Laura's father, you dirty bitch! You think you could buy me with two cows—that I must choose of course—and a horse, a horse and two cows! By God, Prue, you value me very low. Very low indeed.'

Archie laughed till the tears sprang from his eyes. As suddenly as he started he stopped.

'I'm sorry, Prue. You got to go along on your own from now on. You can count me out.'

He pulled a handful of nuts from his pocket and crammed them into his mouth.

'Archie! Archie! Don't go away in a state, Archie. You could have a piece of grazing land to run a few cows on. That's princely. I can't say no more than that. You must see you got a good bargain.'

'You shouting from the steps, Prue,' Archie called.

His spurs jangled. The horse stamped.

'Get out of my way, Dorcas,' Archie shouted. Dorcas shrieked. Archie's horse went stamping slowly away.

★ ★ ★

The following afternoon Lucy was returning from the shop with a tray of provisions on her head. She walked with a straight back. Her arms swung slowly. She saw a statue on the gatepost. She brought up a hand to shade the glare from her eyes. It was Miss Laura. Lucy hurried. Miss Laura was peeling a banana.

A few minutes later Lucy ran shouting into the courtyard. Sarah, Ellen and Berta rushed to the door.

'What happen, man?' asked Sarah.

Lucy pointed towards the road. Her finger stabbed the air.

'Miss Laura down the road,' Lucy said.

The women looked at Sarah.

'What wrong with that, Lucy? Woman want air, man,' Sarah said.

They followed Lucy into the kitchen and helped the tray off her head.

'She fling one banana skin right in my face, for no reason at all, at all,' Lucy said.

'Don't nobody never do nothing without reason. Why she do that, Lucy? Ellen, you know Miss Laura gone out?'

'No, Miss Sarah. She was digging up in the spare-room drawers when I last seen her, Miss Sarah,' Ellen said.

'I think she was in the house a-hunting too, myself,' said Berta.

'Then how come Lucy see her down the road?' Sarah said.

'She must walk, man!' Ellen said. Ellen, Berta and Lucy shouted with laughter.

'Don't think you say nothing funny, Ellen,' said Sarah.

'No, Miss Sarah.'

'Well, then. What she doing down the road, Lucy?'

'Laugh!' said Lucy, and laughed.

'It so sweet you, come we share it, Lucy,' Sarah said.

'I will tell you, Miss Sarah. You gwine see she no got no call to come fling one banana skin into me face.'

'It hurt you, Lucy?' said Sarah.

'No, Miss Sarah. I just coming along the road; minding my own business, when I see her a-sit down 'pon the 'gatepost just like a nigger woman.'

'Don't nobody say that,' said Sarah, boxing Lucy.

Lucy breathed hard while the other women prepared to intervene between her and Sarah.

'Then you don't hear nothing then, Miss Sarah? You don't hear 'bout Miss Prue and Mass Archie and Miss Laura? You don't know what she is?' Lucy shouted.

'I know this. Miss Laura is my mistress. The new one. The young mistress. And Lucy? She is your mistress too. Don't nobody come tell me no lies 'bout Miss Laura, case they want me

lick them down 'pon the ground and trample 'pon them. Now then!

Sarah sat down on the mortar.

'Miss Sarah right, Lucy,' said Ellen.

'She right, man,' Berta said.

'Remember, then,' Sarah said.

Lucy tossed her head. 'Well, why make she don't got no boots on, then?' Lucy said.

'Perhaps her foot hot, Lucy. White people foot hot up to death sometime,' Sarah said.

'It must be it hot, then, for she just give me a little kick. I drop me tray and she fall down off the post. I run and pick up me tray and me cotta and clap them 'pon my head, and when I look back, she gone climb back 'pon the gate, man, with her skirt sailing in the breeze and her foot swinging, bang, bang, bang, it knock 'pon the gate. And eating that banana.'

'Miss Laura a caution, man,' said Sarah.

'And the little toes, Ellen, pink, and the little foot so soft and white. It pretty. & pretty so till!'

'Maybe she don't fretting no more,' said Ellen.

'Pshaw!' Berta said. 'It's man she want man, man!'

'That's common talk, Berta,' Sarah said, strolling out to the courtyard. Her feet made a regular pattern to the courtyard wall. She bent over some strainer vines until she believed herself to be unobserved. Quickly she jumped over the lowest section of the wall. She crouched low on the other side. Lucy was right, thought Sarah, for there was Miss Laura swinging her legs on the gate.

'Lawd-oh!' she said. 'Suppose Busha MacKenzie or somebody come pass and see you, Miss Laura!'

Sarah decided to keep watch.

* * *

About this time Neil Naunton set out with his mother for Montrose. The buggy rolled slowly forward. The nearer they came to Newbiggin, the more Mrs. Naunton fussed. She wore a white satin dress which exposed the roundness of her bosom. Her head and shoulders were well wrapped in a shawl.

'You don't think you got on too much perfume, Mother?'

'At an affair like this you are expected to dress well, Neil. The MacKenzies know everybody. They are making a real splash.'

Neil shrugged his shoulders.

'I think that at least they could have been more neighbourly,' he said.

'Now, Neil, be reasonable. There's everything against it. I explained to you.'

'And to MacKenzie too?'

'The question didn't arise.'

'No. I don't suppose it did.'

'I know you feel incensed against me over something, darling. I am racking and racking my brain to know why, but I don't. How can you be so stupid? She seems to have blinded your eyes after the solemn promise you made me.'

'For God's sake, Mother, don't snifle now. We going to enjoy ourselves. Enjoy ourselves! We all going to have a right-down good time. Laugh. Drink. Eat ourselves. But, for God's sake, let's do it all—all by ourselves. We are a right-down friendly lot, eh? The Nauntons and the MacKenzies. All of the same breed. Hospitable, kind, forgiving—charity! You know that thing, Mother: "But the greatest of these is charity." That parson of yours always preaching it.'

Neil was hunched in his seat.

'You are only young,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'You don't know the world yet—as I do. Then you would understand.'

She placed her hand on Neil's leg. Neil laughed.

'Laura has a pretty face. But a pretty face isn't all, you know. There is the mind to contend with. Better an ugly exterior and a clean, happy mind.'

'Don't no mind cleaner, happier than Laura. Seems there is one sort of charity for her and another kind for people like us.'

'Even the servants have the story now.'

'What story?'

'Don't you know that Prunella Burton and Archie White proved Laura illegitimate?'

'That ridiculous story!'

'Ridiculous, yes. But in the meantime, what of Laura? You don't expect Busha MacKenzie to invite—even if he could, she's

still in deep mourning, remember—you don't think he could associate himself with that sort of talk?

Neil lashed the horses.

'As to that, one word from you could straighten that. Don't no one tell me rubbish about Laura.'

Mrs. Naunton pulled out her handkerchief.

'I know that you have been to see her,' she said in a faint voice.

'You know I don't.'

'And you promised——'

'A promise I kept, for God's sake. And if you start weeping, Mother, see if I don't turn back, put up the buggy and go and see Laura.'

Mrs. Naunton remained silent. The heat was leaving the day. Neil pointed to Newbigin gate.

'Laura,' he said.

Mrs. Naunton sat up and straightened her shawl.

'We mustn't stop. We promised to be early at Montrose.'

'You did,' said Neil.

'I spoke for you, too.'

Neil whipped the horses. Laura saw them coming. She jumped off the gate and started to run home. But she halted. Deliberately she went back to the gate and rescued herself.

The buggy stopped. Laura gazed haughtily down her drive.

'Laura,' said Neil.

'Drive on, Neil,' said Mrs. Naunton.

Laura turned round. She was white and frightened.

'Aunt, Aunt Mabel! I didn't see you,' she said.

'The way you took off!' laughed Neil. Laura looked at him.

'You all dressed up,' she said.

'Yes,' he said.

'I wasn't talking to you,' Laura said.

'Why not?' said Mrs. Naunton. 'I always thought you and Neil were good—friends?'

Laura looked at Neil and turned her back.

'Want her bottom slapped,' Neil said. He felt suddenly in a very good humour. 'Laura? Want I come and slap your bottom for you?'

'Neil,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Don't mean no harm, Mother. Laura knows that. Don't you, Laura?'

'Where you is concerned, I don't know nothing,' Laura said to the gatepost.

'Well, I like that,' Neil said. He laughed loudly and alone.

'We ought to get on,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'You heard, Neil,' said Laura.

'Why don't you come too? Mother, you could soon arrange it.'

'You don't come to see me any more, Laura?' said Mrs. Naunton.

'I go where I wanted,' said Laura sullenly.

'Well,' Mrs. Naunton said, 'I am surprised to hear you say that, Laura, I must say. I thought you of all people always treated my home as your own.'

'I got my own now,' said Laura, pointing to Newbiggin.

'What you think, Mother? You could do it if you choose.'

'What your poor mother would say! Sitting so dirty and untidy on that gate—like a—like a—I don't know what. Don't you have a good frock to wear but that? You're not ashamed?' Mrs. Naunton said.

'Who cares?' said Laura.

'But we do care,' said Neil. 'Don't take on so, Laura.'

'Don't nobody care.'

'We do. I do,' said Neil.

'You don't!' Laura said.

'Take a leaf out of Miss MacKenzie's book, Laura.' Mrs. Naunton half rose in her seat. Laura wilted on her perch.

'Prudence is always so well dressed. Always a lady—no mistaking there. Always correct.'

Neil gritted his teeth.

'You looking real well, Laura,' said Neil.

'Truly? And I been having the fever.'

'Goodbye, Laura. Remember, you are Mistress of Newbiggin, now. The mistress. Come and see me soon.'

'Mother, you don't think that Laura . . .'

'We are going to Prudence MacKenzie's birthday dance, Laura.'

' . . . could come with us?'

'Remember. Come and see me soon, Laura. Goodbye. Drive on, Neil. We are late!'

'Laura! Laura! You want come to the dance——'

'I'm mourning!' said Laura, gripping the gate.

'And who could bother if you in mourning and go to a birthday dance? We all know you never hit it off with your mother. Besides, you don't have to dance——'

'Neil—I forbid it,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'You could sit out on the veranda without actually . . .'

'That's enough, Neil.'

' . . . doing any dancing.'

'But I don't invited, Neil.' Laura's eyes were shining. She hopped about in the gravel.

'Mother here, she will fix that.'

'But Prudence—I don't got a thing to wear——'

'You'll be the prettiest girl at the ball.'

'But it's too late! It's too late!'

'Hurry, hurry!' called Neil. He lashed the horses and the buggy rushed away in a spume of dust. It was twilight.

As Laura ran home, she had one thought. She had never been to a dance. She had no frock. Sarah ran to meet her.

'Sarah! Sarah!' Laura blurted. 'What you think? I going to a dance. A real dance, Sarah, with a band too.'

'Miss Laur'!'

'Yes. It true—true! I want a big bath. Lucy, Ellen, get my bath full of water. I want a big bath.'

'Lucy, Ellen, go fill up Miss Laura bath. Go on, then!' said Sarah.

She ran after Laura to her room. Laura stopped and put a hand to her lips.

'Sarah, I dor't got nothing to wear. At all, at all!' said Laura.

Sarah gasped and hung her lips.

'Only mourning. Oh!' said Laura. She threw herself upon her bed and prepared to weep.

'Miss Laur'!' Sarah said. 'Missis chest, ma'am!'

'Missis chest?'

'Yes, Miss Laura. It full up of pretty clothes!'

'You right, Sarah. I remember I used to try them on years ago—till my mother caught me and beat me—dresses and shoes and gloves——'

'And the flowers, Miss Laura.'

‘And the flowers.’

They found the chest in a spare room. They lifted the lid and the dust rose from it. Inside, under layers of paper, were dresses of silk and satin and lace in red and green and gold and yellow.

‘Ooh!’ said Sarah and Laura together.

Laura found a dress which fitted her and revealed the whiteness of her arms and neck. The bodice was covered in yards of spider-spun lace.

‘For you, Sarah, and for Lucy and Ellen and Berta. A piece of silk for each. And a rose. A rose in gold silk, another in crimson. This for Lucy. Lucy! Lucy! Lucy! Ellen! Here a rose for you, as golden as the sunlight. Feel it. And Ellen, this cluster of buds.’

‘Mistress,’ the women said, swaying their shadows on the wall. ‘It beautiful.’

The servant women chirruped like a cageful of birds.

They dressed her quickly and burnished her hair. At the last moment, Lucy brought her a rose from the garden with dew cool upon its petals. Laura pinned it into her hair. The servant women clapped their hands.

‘Miss Laura. You beautiful mistress. You pretty so till!’ they said, clapping their hands.

The dimple stayed in Laura’s cheek. Samson handed her into the buggy. The buggy lamps were lit.

‘My fan! My fan!’ said Laura.

‘Me will get it, Miss Laura,’ said Ellen.

‘Stand steady, Ellen,’ Sarah said. ‘You would broke it with your heavy hands.’

Laura settled in her seat while Samson tucked the rug about her legs. A yellow streamer dangled over the steps. The horses’ flanks shone.

The women smiled at each other. They had no words. Sarah returned with the fan. Laura flashed it open. It was a peacock’s tail.

The streak of light moved round Samson’s top hat. For a moment his boots came out of the darkness. Then Laura’s back glowed.

The servant women followed the lights like tumblebugs. But the lights outpaced them. They watched them flick and flicker and die, like the sound of the wheels.

'Aaah!' they said, and laughed. But, in a little while, the drum-beat called them. They listened with apathy, then hurried back to Newbiggin, to douse the house in darkness.

In spite of the cool night breeze, Laura was hot. Her shoes cramped her toes. She pushed aside the rug and tore her shoes from her feet. She sighed with relief and laughed.

'Lord, how I going to dance on these high heels? Samson, you got you boots on?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'I don't want you disgrace me.'

'No, Miss Laura.'

'You must do the thing proper.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'You can do it proper? Drive in with a flourish—and so on?'

'And jump down with my top hat under my arm and hand you down to Busha hisself, Miss Laura.'

'Ah,' said Laura. 'Don't—don't drive too fast. Perhaps, perhaps, I shouldn't . . .'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'Well, don't drive too fast, then.'

'No, Miss Laura.'

Laura wriggled her toes. They were swelling, but she forced them back into the shoes.

'Samson!'

'Yes, Miss Laura?'

There was the rattle of the wheels.

'Nothing.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

They heard the whine of the fiddle through the night. The banana leaves were sentinels along the road. Between the leaves, lights twinkled.

Laura's heart beat fast. The fan tumbled from her hand when she saw Montrose grounds, for the trees bore strange-lit fruit.

'Samson!' said Laura.

Samson eased himself to the middle of the seat. He lashed the horses. He held a rein in each hand. Swiftly he pulled. The horses swerved. The buggy rolled into Montrose and stopped before the door.

Laura looked around wildly.

'Samson,' she whispered.

'Here, mistress,' he said beside her. He took her hand and bowed.

Busha MacKenzie came forward.

'Welcome, welcome,' he said.

'Why, thank you, Busha MacKenzie,' said Laura. She hobbled to the ground. Busha MacKenzie's hand faltered and dropped to his side. Laura's hand came up and froze there.

'Mother, it's that strange girl. You know, the Pettigrew girl,' said Prudence.

'Impossible,' Mrs. MacKenzie said.

'But it is. Isn't she mourning? That dress! Was she asked?'

'Certainly not. Prudence, this is your dance with Mr. Naunton.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Neil,' said Laura. Laura saw Neil. He sneaked out of the veranda crowd and followed Prudence into the house.

Someone sniggered and Laura's face grew hot.

'I see you having a dance, Busha MacKenzie. I didn't know that. I am just on the way to one myself.'

'I see.'

'In that case, I shouldn't keep you from your company, should I?' said Laura with a giggle. 'Samson here can tell you. I going to my cousin Prue—you know her, don't you? You and she done business together, I think.'

There were more people on the veranda now. They discussed her freely.

'Well, I mustn't keep you. I am late, as it is. But—but I did want to see you on business——'

'Business!' someone laughed.

'About selling up some cows. I am selling up some cows. I'm not interested in dairy cattle. I hear you buying up cattle——'

'We could perhaps find some more convenient time to discuss business. This is a purely social occasion.'

'Yes, yes. Of course, I see that. It is. I will expect you tomorrow. But you is my neighbour, isn't you? It only fair you get first pick of my cows.'

'Thank you.'

'Well, I hope your daughter has a nice birthday dance, that is all——'

'But, of course, my dear, she knew when she came, of course,' a woman said.

'And I will see you tomorrow. Tomorrow morning early. Say, ten, eleven o'clock. I can't hold back after then. Business is business, you know!'

Laura giggled and turned to Samson. He was chewing his knuckles.

'You got to hurry now, Samson,' said Laura. 'Help me up.'

Samson stepped forward and dropped his top hat. He fumbled and pushed Laura into the buggy. Then he picked up his hat and jumped into his seat.

'Go on,' he said to the horses.

'Don't rush too much, Samson,' said Laura.

'She is cool, that girl,' said a man.

'Goodbye, Busha MacKenzie, I see you tomorrow morning then, ten, eleven o'clock.'

'A pretty little filly too. So old-world!' said the same man's voice.

There was a roar which threatened to explode in Laura's head. Her ear-drums hummed and she shut her eyes to the fairy light, her ears to the music. The horses and buggy poured through the gateway into the road.

'Stop, Samson, stop!' Laura choked. She fell sideways into her seat and prayed. 'Avenge me! Avenge me! Avenge me, O God!'

And she sobbed. The buggy vibrated. Suddenly she stopped. She looked through the trees and saw the lights. They winked and swayed. There was a burst of laughter.

'They laughing at me. Hear that, they laughing at me. Me! Me! Me! The mistress. The Mistress of Newbiggin. They laughing at me!'

Laura tore the flower from her hair and flung it into the road.

'Drive on, Samson. Drive on and on and on!'

* * *

In the morning, before the crowing of the cocks, a buggy rolled slowly past Newbiggin. Mrs. Naunton was asleep with her hands folded in her lap. The buggy jerked into a rut and she woke. She yawned.

'All quiet. All quiet,' she said.

Neil hunched himself over the reins.

'You asleep, Neil?' Mrs. Naunton asked.

'No. But you been.'

'I have not. Why! It's the one thing I could never do.'

'Well, anyhow, you done it.'

Mrs. Naunton rearranged her shawl.

'It's quite cool now.'

'Cool, yes.'

'It's really the most reasonable hour of the twenty-four. I can't think why we don't go to bed later or wake up earlier. It's so—so cool.'

'So you said.'

'Ah well. You enjoyed yourself, darling. I saw you.'

'I got drunk.'

'Drunk? What a thoroughly disgusting word. Every gentleman is expected to fill up on an occasion like this. Why, there weren't really any thoroughly drunk there! When I was a young girl, they used to keep a room to stretch them out in. But that was long ago. Gentlemen behave with more decorum now.'

'Gentlemen! Men! They don't change none at all. They all got the same old impulses they had forty-fifty years ago, drunk or sober.'

He laughed.

'Bet you don't know what that is—or do you, darling Mother?'

'Well!'

'No. Not well. Not well at all. My God. I feel sick. Sick up to my ears.'

His voice rose.

'Have you a headache, darling? Mother soothe it away for you.'

'Don't—don't touch me. I want to vomit. But I can't vomit up that picture; I can't forget—— If I could——'

'You do have a bad headache.'

'Yes. My head aches. My heart. My feet too. Where Prudence stepped on them, dancing, dancing, dancing the whole night through—schottisches, polkas, the waltzes. My God, the lancers! Tum-te-uddy-dum, tum-te-uddy-dum—all night, all night, when all the the time I can hear—I can see——'

'Let Mother soothe it for you, then.'

'No. Leave it alone. It was my invite. Not yours. No, you said. Very well, then, it was all my doing. My God, I need a drink.'

'Prudence is very taken with you, darling. Her mother and I had a long conversation about it. I can tell you that MacKenzie is quite taken with you and will favour your proposal. I wouldn't be surprised if something came of it, and soon.'

'Yes, soon. Oh, I know. Prudence think the world begin and end in me. But, but, Mother—Mother—— Don't you spare a thought for—for——'

'No. It was her doing, Neil. You've been tormenting yourself all night. I saw, darling, and I suffered for you—with you. Besides! That frock brought back memories of long ago, when Laura Pettigrew was young and courting. Laura had no right to wear that particular frock——'

'But she was beautiful—the most beautiful at the ball! I knew she would be, the prettiest at the ball!'

'And shameless, lying—— Do you know she made a deal with Busha MacKenzie at Laura's funeral to sell him coconuts?'

Neil looked round.

'You look surprised! But believe me, Laura can take whatever comes her way, for she is tough underneath; as hard as iron.'

'It doesn't matter. Not to you or me or Laura or anybody. But Laura hard? That I will never believe. Did you see her face, Mother—desperate? And that flower in her hair? And I turned my back on her and went with Prudence to dance, dance, the night long, schottisches, lancers, polkas, all the tunes the fiddlers could play. And I seen her eyes, searching for me, so big and—frightened like some wild thing, and I turned my back. I wasn't there. I didn't want to be there! You understand, Mother, I didn't want to be there. My God, I want to be sick.'

'Your poor head, your poor head,' crooned Mrs. Naunton.

★ ★ ★

The dawn was rosy. Laura saw it light the horizon and spread itself, softly. She dressed herself and coiled her hair. There was much to do if Newbiggin was to receive Busha MacKenzie that morning. In a short time, the grounds swarmed with stooping men, billing the grass. Sarah took coffee to them. The men knocking down the courtyard wall rushed at it with an old tree

trunk. Sarah shook her head. She could not think what had got into Miss Laura, making all this fuss and mess. The kitchen was empty. Sarah put food on a tray and went to find Miss Laura. She passed the women scrubbing the drawing-room walls, balanced on chairs. Ellen was beating the carpet near the turkey pen and the turkeys were rushing about in perplexity. Miss Laura was not in her room.

'Where Miss Laura?' Sarah whispered.

'No weed she weeding the garden, Miss Sarah,' Lucy whispered.

'Weeding?' Sarah asked.

'With her own hands, down along with all them black niggers,' Lucy said.

Sarah could not reply.

'The living truth, Miss Sarah,' Berta said.

Sarah went past the stack of family portraits and brown landscapes leaning against the piano. Levi, she soon saw, was directing matters while Miss Laura worked.

'Zekie, shift out this old roses bushes. It don't good.'

'Leave it, Levi. It will flower when the weeds stop choking it,' said Laura.

'What you doing moving that roses, Zekie? You mad, no?' Levi said.

'Some breakfast, Miss Laura,' Sarah said.

Laura glanced at Sarah and chucked some weeds on to a pile by Levi's feet.

'Some food, Miss Laura. Come. Keep your strength up, mistress.'

'Later. Later, Sarah.'

Sarah turned round and walked back through the drawing-room. She shook her head at the women. They shook their heads also, and scrubbed the walls harder. Samson was in the kitchen now for some food. He sighed.

'You don't got nothing to sigh over, old man,' said Sarah angrily.

'That wall shake down this long time, Sarah. Now we must finish knock it down.'

'If Miss Laura say so,' Sarah said.

'Miss Laura,' Samson said.

'Samson,' Sarah whispered, 'something happen Miss Laura

last night? She don't eat nothing. She don't talk. Just bending down like old nigger.'

'I must go carry more stone, Miss Sarah,' Samson said.

'See you food here,' Sarah said.

He ate it.

With the heat of the day, the labourers went back to work in the fields. They each received two water coconuts to quench their thirst.

Laura dressed herself in heavy mourning and sat down to wait. It was ten o'clock. She looked with satisfaction at the clean walls and gleaming furniture. There was a vase of flowers on the piano. The veranda was scrubbed.

'Lucy!' Laura called.

Lucy came.

'Fix that picture straight on the wall. You think this is a pigsty? They wouldn't employ you in the kitchen up at Montrose. Everything done right at Montrose—same as here.'

'You ready for you food, Miss Laura?' Sarah asked. She held the tray in her hands.

'There's a time for food, Sarah.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Sarah came nearer and lifted a dish.

'A nice piece of fry pork, Miss Laura,' she said.

Laura went into her mother's room.

'Lucy,' said Sarah.

'She tired, man,' Lucy said.

'What to do?' Sarah said.

Lucy shrugged.

Laura returned with a bottle of port.

'Draw this, Sarah, and empty it into the port decanter. Put it on the silver tray with two glasses and bring it here. Put it top of the piano.'

Laura sat down.

The air hummed. She strolled to the door, then returned to her chair. The sound of chopping wood splintered the air. Laura walked to the veranda. She waited there a moment, then went back to sit down.

'You ready for food, Miss Laura?'

'Get out, Sarah,' said Laura. She looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to eleven.

'There's still hope,' she said. 'Plenty of time yet.'

Levi laughed in the courtyard. Laura relaxed and shut her eyes. 'Plenty of time.'

The clock struck eleven. Laura jumped up and shook it. The hands said eleven o'clock.

'A minute or two more,' Laura said. 'In business, you got to be exact and business-like. But you don't got to be too exact!'

Laura walked to the gate facing the veranda. It stood alone on its pillars without a fence to defend its position. She could hear a horseman, going the other way. Laura clasped her hands and looked towards her gate.

'God, if You is in Heaven, You know all. I ask You. Don't put no more on my shoulders. Let Busha MacKenzie come to me. Bring him to me. I will promise You anything. I will go to church even. I will buy a font, a ten-pound font for the kirk. Please, God.'

A man drove a cow along the road.

'Samson,' called Laura.

'Yes, Miss Laur?'

'Saddle my horse and leave it standing ready for me. Quick—quick!'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Then Busha will see I only waited as a favour. That I got other business to do,' Laura said to herself.

It was as hot indoors as out. Laura went into her mother's room and knelt by the bed.

'A ten-pound font,' she said. 'A ten-pound font!'

She went into the courtyard. It was bare now, and trampled. A stubble of stones and loose earth marked its boundary. Samson waited with the horse. Levi stood still. The women lingered behind the kitchen door.

'You see—you see Busha MacKenzie come past this morning, Levi?' she asked.

'Yes, Miss Laura. Him and Miss Prudence gone down Mrs. Naunton house. We see the motor in the yard.'

Samson rubbed his toes in the soil.

'Mrs. Naunton?' Laura said. She felt foolish. She wanted to laugh, to throw back her head and laugh till her palate hummed out of her mouth.

'Yes, Miss Laura. Long time. Eh, Samson? You no see Busha go down in him car one-two hour ago?'

Samson groaned.

'A ten-pound font,' Laura said. She was gaunt. She was on the horse, flying through the air, churning up the road.

'I've had a nightmare,' Laura said. 'I dreamt a bad dream!'

She shook the hair from her eyes, and wiped the blood from her lips.

'My blood?' she asked herself. Her lips were cut. She was near Montrose. It surprised her. She pulled up the horse and looked about. Last night she had been happy here.

Laura was not expecting Busha when his car came abreast of her. She shrank into the saddle, but faced the road. What she saw opened her lips. Neil Naunton sat close beside Prudence in the back seat.

'That Pettigrew girl again,' said Prudence.

Neil looked up, startled. He looked quickly at Busha before him, and when he looked again Laura was galloping home to Newbiggin.

Mrs. Naunton was waiting for her in the drawing-room. She was sipping a glass of port.

Laura entered and leaned against the door. She was breathing noisily. Mrs. Naunton stood up.

'I'm not wanted. After that long, hot, dusty ride to see you, I am not wanted,' Mrs. Naunton said.

'You wouldn't come without a reason, Aunt Mabel. I know that now. You don't put your foot in Newbiggin House without a reason. Just say it, Aunt Mabel.'

'You cleaned this room out well. Just today, Sarah said. Wonder why today specially? Still, whatever made you do it, the change here is for the best. I must say that. I forgot this room was this beautiful green.'

'Anything else, Aunt Mabel?'

'I seemed to have forgotten that it was green. I remembered it as brown. A dirty brown.'

Laura sat down.

'You don't have anything to say, Laura, after last night?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing! I suspected as much. Oh, don't boil up on me. I

know you have a temper. You must curb it. Learn to manage it or it will ride you hard.'

'Sarah!

Mrs. Naunton and Laura looked at each other until Sarah arrived.

'Tell Samson bring round Mrs. Naunton horse. She just going.'

'Yes, Miss Laura,' Sarah said.

'Dismissed, ch, Laura? Pride. Pride. And remember about that temper of yours, or it will ride you, Laura.'

'I will remember, Aunt Mabel.'

'Oh! I nearly forgot why I came here.'

Laura laughed.

'In spite of how you showed Neil and myself up last night with that disgusting performance.'

'I showed you up!'

'I thought I would be the first to give you the good news. I know—how much you think of Neil. Neil likes you too, even though—but never mind——'

'The news, Aunt Mabel! The reason you come here in the heat and dust.'

'Yes—the news. I know you will be glad to know and be happy for me. Neil is engaged. Engaged to be married to Prudence MacKenzie. My son! My son!'

Laura sat down.

Chapter Fourteen

The banging of the doors woke Laura. Simultaneously, Sarah and the women rushed into Laura's room.

It was dark. Laura jumped out of bed and ran to look out of doors.

'What's it? What's the time?'

The clock answered. It struck three sonorously.

'Three o'clock!' said Laura. 'A storm coming up, Sarah. You lock the place up? Lock the place up, Sarah. Berta, get the nails out of the pantry. You and Ellen nail up the windows. Hurry! Sarah, go and see after the turkeys. What's that?'

'Wind, Miss Laura,' Lucy said.

'You shivering, Lucy. You never see hurricane yet? You want something to do. See if Samson about or Levi. My cattle! I want my cattle drove into Newbiggin grounds, where I can keep my eye on them.'

Something fell heavily against the door. It was a saddle cloth.

'Pray God the storm don't hit us.'

'Miss Laura, Samson come, ma'am,' said Sarah.

Laura ran out to him.

'Storm warning, Miss Laura,' he panted.

The air was still. Black and grey clouds prowled the sky. Flocks of birds glided overhead.

'Help Levi get the cows into Newbiggin.'

'Levi getting them, Miss Laura.'

'Hurry!'

Samson hobbled away, like a lop-sided dog. Ragged hammering came from various parts of the house. A dog howled. Another howled.

The leaves on the trees stirred and were still. The clouds parted and a sun of blood leered. It gave no light.

Laura hurried into the kitchen to light the lantern. The stray cat came and rubbed itself against her leg. Laura heard a new sound. She carried the lamp to the door to see who the rider was.

It was Neil. He dismounted and took her in his arms. He kissed her until the tenseness left her body.

'Be careful! Pray God we don't get a bad blow. I mortgaged up to the limit, the very limit,' Neil said.

Laura wrapped her arms around his neck.

'Don't cry. There's tomorrow. Lock up tight.'

He was gone in a moment. Laura listened to the retreating hooves without moving.

'Bless the storm,' she said. She picked up the lantern and went into the house. The house was secure. The servant women ranged themselves before her with the flat-irons they used as hammers.

'Everywhere locked up?' Laura asked.

'Everywhere, ma'am,' they said.

'Where Sarah?'

'Here, mistress.'

'Get some buckets and basins and things. Better get them now. Then shut all the doors after you. Nothing worse than a banging door when it blows.'

Someone knocked on the back door. Laura went to open it. Lucy, Berta and Ellen followed.

'Who is it?'

'Me, Levi, mistress.'

Laura unbolted the door. She heard a low whine which changed to a whistle.

'Better come inside, or you blow 'way.'

Levi rushed inside, but Samson hesitated.

'Hurry up, Samson,' Laura said.

Berta dashed past Samson into the darkness.

'Berta, come back here. Come back here at once. Lucy, Ellen go after her.'

The women crouched against the wall. Samson turned to go.

'Stay, old man,' said Laura. 'Just hold up the light.'

Laura ran outside after Berta. At first, the wind bombarded her chest so that she could scarcely move. Dust drove against her nostrils. She heard Berta crying and followed the sound. Berta was hiding in the coach-house.

'Come,' said Laura, 'you don't want kill yourself?'

Laura took Berta's hands and they began to burrow through the wall of air back to the house. A whine sliced the air. It was a sheet of corrugated iron from the coach-house roof. Berta began to babble about God.

A wind wave slapped the house and receded like water on a beach. Samson dragged Berta and Laura into the house. Berta fell upon her knees. Lucy began to cry.

After a moment, Laura hustled them all to the drawing-room. There was a roar at ~~approaching~~ approaching. It gathered speed and ~~rushed~~ rushed closer. The lantern swayed against the roof. Laura ran to take it down.

The storm crashed against the house. The lantern splintered. The women shrieked. Levi whimpered.

'The lantern!' Laura shouted. She struggled to steady it. A nail flew out of a jalousie and skidded over the piano top. The window banged and wind gushed through the house.

'The nails. Quick! Who got the nails?'

'Oh God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come.
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.'

The women sang. Samson and Levi watched Laura. She found the nail on top of the piano. A picture flew off the wall.

'Hold the window while I nail it, Samson,' Laura said.

The wind howled. The cattle lowed.

'The cows all right, Levi?' asked Laura. Levi watched the window with frightened eyes.

'Beneath the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure.
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.'

Laura walked about the room slapping her palm with her hand. Thunder rolled. It cracked overhead. Lightning illumined the tossing trees momentarily. Rain-stones clattered on the roof.

'Thank God -' Laura said—'the rain.' It poured straight down. Laura tossed herself into a chair and relaxed.

'It's all right,' said Laura. 'The rain will damp it down.'

It rained for two hours, and when it stopped night had fallen. The air was crisp and cool. The sky was bright.

Chapter Fifteen

Laura awoke suddenly. She felt tired and stupid. She lay heavy in bed, unable to think. Then she heard a shout and then another. Feet trampled the ground.

'Oh God!' she said. 'The storm.'

She was dressing when she heard a scratching on the outer door. She finished coiling her hair before she opened it.

'Miss Laura,' said Samson.

Laura looked at the banana walk for a long time.

'Well,' she said, 'is not the first time we got a blow-out, Samson.'

'But we don't, Miss Laura, we don't got a blow-out!'

The old man laughed and slapped his thighs.

'I got my eyes for witness, Samson,' said Laura. 'It all gone. Look at it parading on the ground there in rows. My God, I can see for miles, right back to the foot of the hills!'

'Lawd-me-God, Miss Laura, nowhere else don't blow down. It funny, it funny so till!' said Samson. 'Nowhere else don't blow down.'

'Nowhere else?'

'Nowhere else, Miss Laura!'

'Thank God!'

'Them say is Missis ghost wave the storm off, Miss Laura.'

'Samson,' Laura said, 'how you know all this? How you know nowhere else don't blow down? It blow down bad here.'

'Me look, Miss Laura,' he said. 'Me get up early and me look. Mass Neil blow down. Mass Neil got bad blow-out.'

'Mass Neil?'

'Yes'm. Bad blow-out.'

'And Busha . . .'

'Yes'm,' Samson said, looking at the ground because he did not know.

'You know for sure, Samson?'

'Yes'm. Bad. Him blow down bad.'

A smile started in Laura's eyes and was all over her face when she went to eat. She heard Samson and the women laughing and chatting in the kitchen. Presently Sarah entered to say that Levi wanted to see her. Laura went to the courtyard. The ground was brown with dew. Levi detached himself from a knot of labourers and came towards her.

'I heard the news, Levi,' Laura said. She laughed when she saw the consternation on Levi's face. 'We don't all asleep.'

'You hear, Miss Laura?'

'Yes, Levi. I heard long time.'

'Is good news, eh, Miss Laura?'

'Good news indeed.'

'Amen,' the servants said from the kitchen doorway.

'Newbiggin must do something for the needy this day, Levi. Them niggers don't wasting no time! They turn up soon enough, eh?'

The servants laughed and Levi stirred the ground with his toe. He had hurried out without his boots.

'Come here, Abimalek.' Laura said. 'What you come for, eh? What you come for? So early in the morning?'

Laura threw out her hands and laughed.

'Food! Food! That's what. I will feed all the hungry. All. Mine and the others too. Levi, you hear? You must see about it. Mose? Not Mose I see hiding there? Mose?'

'Yes, Miss Laura,' Mose said, stepping forward.

'Go and find Parson. Tell him—tell him I want him. Urgent.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'I don't care, Levi, where the niggers come from—providing it's food they want and work, I will look after them.'

Laura turned to go.

'Miss Laura,' said Levi.

Laura looked at him.

'Miss Laura, Zekie baby dead!'

Laura forced herself to walk to the door. She was trembling.

'That's a pity, Levi. A big pity.'

'Miss Laura.'

'Yes.'

'Miss Laura, the pickney head busted open. All the "marrer" come out.'

'I don't want hear nothing 'bout it, Levi. It got nothing to do with me.'

'Is the house, Miss Laura. The house. Zekie house, Miss Laura, broke it open.'

'Bury it. Bury it. You put dead thing under the ground. Dead things is carrion. Bury it.'

Laura ran into the house and lay on her bed.

In the kitchen Lucy said 'Oh, my Gawd, my Gawd, my Gawd' and only shut her mouth after Sarah boxed it.

Later Mose ran to the kitchen door and stopped to catch his breath.

'Take you time, Mose,' Sarah said. 'Miss Laura not waiting at all, at all.'

'Parson and him buggy at the church, Miss Sarah.'

'And him buggy,' Lucy said.

'Him say him too busy, Miss Sarah. Him can't come now, Miss Sarah.'

'Parson too busy?' Sarah said.

'Parson too busy,' said Mose.

'The man "fasty", man,' Ellen said.

'Shut you mouth, Ellen. How you can call Parson "fasty"? You think him a nigger man?'

Sarah flounced past the women into Laura's room.

'Parson say him too busy, Miss Laura. Him can't come. Him at the church.'

Laura was lying on her face. She jumped up and reached for her hat and veil off the door.

'So he can't come?' she said. 'At my kirk, eh? Tell Samson bring my horse round.'

Sarah ran out of the room.

'Can't come, eh? Too busy. Can't come, eh? At my kirk. At my kirk!'

'Parson gwine catch trouble, man,' Berta said as the servants watched Laura galloping away.

'Parson don't got no right send a message like that by Mose,' Sarah said. 'He don't got no right.'

'Then me no say long time him too "fasty", 'man,' Ellen said.

Sarah went to the door and sneered at the press of labourers crowding into the courtyard. She took a bucket of water and flung it into the courtyard. She hated to have old niggers too close to her kitchen.

When Laura reached the kirk she jumped from the saddle and walked past Parson's buggy. She went to the vestry door, flung it open and stood in the doorway lashing her skirt with her whip. Parson crouched lower over the book before him.

'Look round, Parson. You got a visitor. You been telling me to come more often to the kirk. No, don't get up,' she said, as he showed no sign either of looking round or standing up!

She reached his chair, bent forward and shut the book. The book was full of names.

'You're a man of manners and breeding, Parson Bickett. You can always tell a man of manners and breeding. Don't get up to draw out a chair for me, neither. In a manner of speaking you can say I not stopping.'

'Miss Pettigrew. Miss Laura,' Parson Bickett said. He fumbled from his chair.

'I don't expect you heard me, Parson,' Laura said.

'Well—I hope I find you well?'

'When I sent for you, if you wanted to know so badly, you could come, Parson.'

'It is a bad time to summon——'

'You right. It's a bad time. That's why I called on you. Seemingly, however, a bad time is the wrong time though, Parson.'

'Oh, don't misunderstand——'

'I don't think so, Parson.'

'We always seem to—seem to——'

'It is the House of God,' Laura said suddenly. 'I not going to row.'

She wandered around the room until she came to a shelf with hymn books, Bibles and a glass bowl sitting on a litter of pamphlets. She lifted the bowl, looked at it and put it down again.

'Is my intention to buy you a font, a good font. You can't go on baptizing pickneys out of a fruit bowl for ever, Parson.'

'Thank you,' Parson said. He clapped his hands together. He took off his spectacles, blew on them and put them on again.

'I want you down at Newbiggin. I got a crowd down there. I want you with me. With me alone. I got a lot of niggers to handle. Feed and clothe and doctor. I need help. Your help. I can't rely on Levi. Levi is only a fool. We want to get started right away. I know you got a bag of medicines. Maybe somebody's broke a bone. I know you can set bones. So I hear.'

'Miss Laura——'

'Listen what I plan. I will feed them—free. All, all that come to me, no matter who. It's my thanks, you might say, to God for letting me off light. Neil Naunton knocked out——'

'Miss Pettigrew——'

'Busha MacKenzie—pshaw! I will feed all their niggers for them. Newbiggin can stand it.'

'I am sorry, Miss Laura, very sorry ——'

'You don't understand, Parson, it's my inheritance. If I don't who will?'

'Busha MacKenzie will look after his own——'

'Not him. Not him,' Laura said. 'He's too mean. Why should he?'

'Because he has always done it, Miss Laura. I was trying to tell you. I'm—I am going now to Montrose. It's impossible to come to Newbiggin.'

'Did you say you going to Montrose?'

'He asked my help—he asked my help. But I am returning here. I thought this would be a good central place to bring the wounded and to tend them.'

'Here? In my kirk?'

Parson wriggled.

'It is God's House, as you said, Miss Laura.'

'Never! Never! Never! Not Busha MacKenzie's niggers. You won't tend them here. Let them go to Montrose. Let them cluster round Montrose beautiful front steps and foul them. You'll not bring one of them here. Not one. I'll fire you.'

Parson Bickett put the book under his arm.

'You heard me? I will fire you.'

Laura lashed the table with the whip.

'You won't see that font—that ten-pound font. I won't give it you. I won't. You can't side against me. I won't let you.'

Parson went out of the vestry and Laura followed. He locked the door and turned to Laura.

'We seem to be moving in different directions, Miss Laura,' Parson Bickett said. 'I could only wish it were otherwise. I wish it with all my heart. I wish that with all my heart.'

Laura clamped her jaws tight and hurriedly mounted her horse. As she swung round to the gate, the horse's hooves dashed the earth from her mother's grave. A block of people across the road forced her to stop. She sat angrily in the saddle looking at them.

'Tell him 'bout Zekie pickney,' a big black man said.

'Zekie baby dead,' the others said.

'Tell him again Zekie pickney dead,' the black man said.

'Zekie pickney dead!' they all growled.

'Tell him how Zekie pickney dead,' the black man said.

'Out of my way. Out of my way,' Laura said. She kicked the horse and lashed it with her whip. The horse reared. The people jumped aside and Laura galloped between them.

The crowd had increased at Newbiggin. Samson ran out to take the horse from her.

'Mass Neil come, Miss Laura,' he said.

Laura saw a child holding Neil's horse. The anger left her face and Samson smiled.

'Levi! Levi!' Laura called.

'Yes'm,' Levi said. He had found time to go home for his boots.

'Anybody sick?' Laura asked.

'Few, Miss Laura.'

'You round them all up? No matter where they come from?'

'Yes, Miss Laura. Plenty of them come from Busha, Miss Laura, and plenty come from Mass Neil.'

'Look after them special, Levi. I must see they looked after good. Then they can work for Newbiggin. Round them up round the coach-house. I will talk to them later. And get Ram Singh. Anybody got a tender goat can curry?'

'Zacci got a goat, Miss Laura.'

'Kill it,' Laura said. 'What that man doing here? Don't you got yaws? Levi, don't that man got yaws? Look at his hand. Clear him out. He can go to poorhouse for relief. I don't got none for him.'

'Miss Laura,' said Conchita Morgan.

It was hot and flies droned.

'Yes, Conchita.'

'My mother send me to you, Miss Laura.'

'Get on, Conchita.'

'The beam in the roof cracked, Miss Laura.'

'What of it, Conchita?'

'My mother say it dangerous, Miss Laura,' Conchita said.

'Listen, everybody,' Laura said. 'You think I don't got nothing to do. The pickney dead. The roof cracked. My God! I got work to do. Conchita, you can't see I busy now?'

Laura went quickly inside.

'Yes, Miss Laura,' Conchita whispered, and trudged sullenly away.

Neil was lying on the sofa chewing his finger-nails. He went swiftly to Laura when he saw her and took her in his arms.

'Better?' Neil said.

'Much,' Laura said. 'I feel so drained. So much to do.'

Neil held her tightly.

'You got off easy, though, Laura,' he whispered. 'Special treatment for (he pure!'

'Don't say that.' Laura covered his lips with her finger. He bit it and she laughed.

'As for me . . . ' Neil said. He wiped his finger along his throat. 'Don't! All of a sudden——'

Laura stopped and pulled away.

'Come back,' Neil said. 'You've found your rightly place.'

'Did last night mean anything, Neil?'

After a pause he nodded, and Laura began to cry without sound.

'Only,' Neil said, 'I broke. This storm the last bloody thing. Laura, I broke. I can't offer nobody a thing. I am just nothing. Just look at me? Just look at me?'

He stood away and smiled as tragically as he could.

'Debts, debts, debts. A whole year's labour blown away. Blown away. Poof! Poof! Gone. Gone. I could shoot myself.'

'Neil, you frighten me, you talk so funny.'

'Well, you can't understand, Laura? You not touched. Not touched at all. Not at all, at all.'

Laura led him to the window and pointed to the bananas lying on the ground.

'Nothing. Nothing. I want money. If I don't get two hundred and fifty pound I—I don't know what I will do.'

Neil took Laura's lips and kissed them.

'You are my hope, and my last hope. Fail me now, Laura, and I am lost. 'Lost—lost!' His voice rose.

Laura relaxed, stroked his moustache and smiled.

'It's the first shock. It's how I felt when I looked out the back door this morning and saw all that devastation. All that ground razed. I just kind of died, inside. You know, I believed everyone and everything against me. Then Samson told me——'

'That's different, Laura. You don't understand complete despair. I must have two hundred and fifty pound. Two hundred and fifty pound within the week. Am I getting it, or not? Don't wrap it up. Just give me.'

'You asking me for two hundred and fifty pound?'

'Of course. I want it in a week.'

'Just like that?'

'You got it.'

'How you know I got it?'

'You got money in the bank. Old Mother Laura was a close one. I know. Don't tell me she didn't leave that salted away in a bank—or under the floor-boards.'

'I haven't got it.'

Neil paused and began to button his jacket.

'Very well, you force me. Busha it is—and his beautiful daughter.'

'Wait!'

Laura rubbed her palms together.

'You just shocked me for a moment. Two-fifty. Two-fifty. But—but can't you raise two-fifty yourself?'

Neil shook his head and tickled the tip of her nose with his forefinger.

'But you could raise a mortgage . . . Two-fifty—not a lot.'

'Too much for me,' he said.

'No? You could get a mortgage for two-fifty at the loan bank or—'

'Everything I got mortgaged already. You might as well know. All except—and that's no bloody . . . Don't question me, Laura!'

'I'm not questioning you, Neil.'

Laura sat down on the piano stool and examined her boots.

'Well, I haven't got two-fifty. But I got—I got two hundred that I wanted to keep intact—I mean—I might still get a blow-out or want something or . . .'

'That's enough for now,' Neil said. He kissed her greedily. 'I know where I can raise the rest I need—if you agree, you pretty little thing—'

'Pretty—'

'Only just get me that two hundred fast.'

He moved to go.

'Neil.'

'Yes?'

'How about—how about security—I mean—'

'Why you—you—I will pay you back in three months. That's security.'

'I don't want time. I want something I can hold on to.'

Laura hung her head. She was ashamed of the heat in her face. She heard him thumping his palm.

'You'll have it,' he said. 'Land. Rock and soil. Land. The only piece don't mortgage. But I won't forget you couldn't trust me, Laura.'

'No. Not that. It's—you don't understand.'

She ran after him. He wrenched the reins from the child's hand and vaulted into the saddle. With a jab of the spurs he rode away.

'Ah, very well,' Laura said. She was irritable again.

Levi and Sarah rushed to her at once and spoke together.

'Miss Laura,' they said.

'Go on, Sarah,' Laura said.

'Him want me food and me pot, Miss Laura, to cook for them—for them . . .'

Sarah wiped her eyes on her sleeves.

'I said just lend me, Sarah,' Levi shouted.

'You didn't. You come into my kitchen to thief my pot——'

Laura interrupted.

'Levi, send to the Chiny shop and borrow some things. Order a bag of rice and a bag of flour and a tin of sweet oil. Get salt too. Sarah don't keep food for you. The goat killed?'

'Yes'm. Zacci didn't want it kill, Miss Laura.'

'Why not?'

'He don't want sell it.'

'Ram Singh come?'

'He started the curry, Miss Laura.'

'All right. I will talk to the labourers now, Levi.'

Sarah watched Levi following Miss Laura and sniffed. She heard Levi bawling presently.

'Keep quiet. Miss Laura come talk to you.'

'That Levi think him is white man,' Sarah said.

'The chairman, man,' Lucy said.

'Lawd!' Berta said, and spat through the door.

'Now listen,' Laura shouted. 'I got something to say to you all. I don't want say it twice over. You all welcome here. You welcome to come and full up your belly if you hungry. Levi will get some of you to stack up the fall-down bananas, the small-hand and the bruised, behind this coach-house and see that every

family—every family—get one stem to take home. Now then. Half of you I don't know. There's a lot of strange faces here today. All right. But if you eat my food—and I can smell the curry—'

There was loud applause.

'If you eat my curry you do my work. You come of your own accord. I don't want no slackers. I don't want no slackers in Newbiggin. This is not a holiday. Don't treat it like one. Now then. Anybody hurt bad? Anybody naked? And don't tell me no lies. Anybody hurt bad go into the courtyard. Anybody hurt real bad must find the doctor. Don't no use me doctoring you if you hurt bad.'

'Doctor can't help Zekic,' somebody said.

Laura pretended not to hear, and it was not repeated. But the people near her rubbed their feet furiously in the grass.

Sarah ran out to Laura.

'I got nice dinner for you, Miss Laura,' she said.

'What is it, Sarah?'

'One of the turkey, Miss Laura.'

'Turkey!'

'One of the turkey broke its leg, Miss Laura, so I get Samson kill it.'

'I don't like turkey,' Laura said. 'Give me a piece of roast salt fish.'

She left Sarah with her mouth hanging open.

'Me like turkey, Miss Sarah,' said Lucy.

'Me too,' ~~Berta~~ said.

'Don't nobody roast a turkey good like my moomah,' said Ellen.

'Your mother never roast a turkey from she born,' Sarah said.

'Her moomah-in-law she mean, Miss Sarah,' Samson said. He ran before Ellen's kick reached him.

The servants helped Laura to dress the cuts and bruises, while the smell of simmering curry grew stronger and stronger. In the afternoon Laura wrote to Lawyer Reid about withdrawing the two hundred pounds for Neil. At the same time, she anticipated his reply by sending a note to Aunt Prue. She wanted Aunt Prue at Newbiggin early in the morning in two days' time and not before.

In the evening, when the labourers had left Newbiggin and it was cool and calm, Laura bathed and dressed carefully. Her cheeks were rounded with happiness as she waited for Neil. But Neil did not come, because he was expected at Montrose. He took a glass of rum at the Chinaman's shop and left abruptly when Archie White entered.

Archie White laughed.

'A big rum, Charley,' he said, and clapped money on the counter. He faced the room.

'Lawd!' he said. 'You go to funeral, eh? Who the singing up the road for, eh?'

Nobody replied.

'Eh, Samson?'

'Zekie pickney dead,' Samson said.

'Eh! Eh! Zekie got plenty more where that come from, eh? Gimme another rum, Charley. Must drink a rum. Who want a rum? Nobody. Good. Nobody.'

'Yessir,' Charley said.

'You is a yellow fool, Charley,' Archie White said. 'That's why you in business. Who got something to sell? Nobody want money! A lot of shits—all of you. Another rum, Charley.'

Archie tossed some nuts into his mouth.

'I give two shilling a hundred for coconuts—mixed seed, but mostly big.'

He laughed suddenly, poured down his drink and pocketed his change.

'You got something to sell, I buy. Pass it aound. I'll buy.' Presently they heard him wetting the wall. When he left, talk began.

'What then, Samson?' a man said.

'Man! Man! I see a big—a big sheet, like a big sheet of lightning, all white and glistening and golden.'

'Golden?' the people said.

Charley's slippers slapped the floor.

'Golden, with a kind of green light!'

'Lawd! Golden and green light,' a man said.

'And it move.'

'Eh!' the people said.

Charley began to sweep the floor.

'It move and move and move and move till it rest right over Newbiggin House. It settle down over the four corner of Newbiggin House. Then I know!'

'What, Samson?' a man said.

'I know something,' Samson said.

'What, Samson?' they asked.

' "A know something,
A wouldn't tell a man.
Cassada dumpling
Kill a nigger man!" ' he said.

'Lawd-me-God-oh!' a man said. 'You real bad man, man.'

Chapter Sixteen

During the night the stack of bruised bananas behind the coach-house disappeared.

The labourers came in even greater numbers for food. Word had been spread about the 'curry goat feed' that Miss Laura was giving free. Levi arrived simultaneously with Ram Singh. Ram Singh sat on his haunches and looked down his thin nostrils at the crowd. Occasionally he slapped his wrapper because the flies tended to settle. Levi had found another goat and bespoken one or two more. The curry was guaranteed.

Neil Naunton rode in early in the morning. He embraced Laura and while his lips rested on hers he asked for the money.

'Time, Neil. Time,' Laura said.

'You said yesterday you didn't want time,' Neil said.

They giggled.

'About yesterday,' Laura said. 'Forget yesterday. That's the past. We got the present. Here——'

He kissed her again.

'And now,' he said.

Laura snuggled into his arms.

'When you get that money, eh?' he asked.

'I wrote off to Lawyer Reid about it yesterday,' Laura said.

'Don't bring no lawyers into it,' Neil said.

'I not, Nilly, but I got to. Is the law, he says. I not of age yet. Besides, I don't know if he—there's the certificate——'

'Rubbish. You of age,' Neil said. He tilted her chin and kissed her nose.

'When you think you get it, then? I don't want to hurry you. But I want it inside a week. One week.'

He kissed her.

'And I don't want no lawyer knowing 'bout my business, neither. Don't let him persuade you off it. Is my business. At least, yours and mine.'

'Oh, Neil,' Laura said. 'I'll try. Tomorrow when Aunt Prue comes, we'll go to Gayle.'

'I'll come with you,' Neil said. 'That other little business—you know how much extra I got to find elsewhere—well, I think I can fix that up then too. I might want you to sign up something.'

'Sign something?'

'Uh-hu. You know. Just mean you know me—I am a good boy.'

'You aren't——'

'Ssh! Don't let anyone know.'

They laughed softly.

'Till tomorrow, then. Must go now. Kiss? Till tomorrow.'

He rode out. Laura did not see him, but his horse faced towards Montrose.

★ ★ ★

Early next morning Samson dressed himself in his spotted neckerchief. He cleaned the buggy and groomed the horses while appearing to take no notice of the swarms of sycophants about him. Presently he backed the horses between the shafts and led the buggy to the courtyard.

'You going out, Samson?' said Ellen.

Samson removed the wax from his ears with a stick, which he threw on the ground.

'Dress up, eh?' Ellen said.

'Keep quiet, Ellen,' Sarah said.

'Me only say—Lawd! Look Mass Neil.'

Samson covered his mouth and chuckled. Ellen showed him her tongue and hid behind the kitchen door.

Lucy, Berta and Sarah was thinking the same thing as Samson. 'I don't see why not me if he can do Ellen?' Sarah said. Samson choked. Then hawked and spat between the horses' feet.

'You think Mass Neil and Miss Laura . . .' said Lucy.

Sarah gave her a look. Lucy shrugged and closed her lips. When she believed Sarah to be looking the other way, Lucy tried to sneak into the house. She wanted to know what was going on inside. It was so quiet. But Sarah grabbed her skirt and she pitched backward into the kitchen.

'Give up, Lucy,' Berta said, and Lucy joined in the laughter.

There was only an occasional giggle in the drawing-room. Neil did not give Laura a chance to talk.

'Happy?' he asked, fondling her.

She nodded.

'Not long now. Soon as I get my hands on that money—not long now,' he said.

She nodded.

'Neil!'

'Don't talk.'

He kissed her.

'Someone will see us,' Laura said.

'Let them.'

'Neil!'

'Ssh.'

Presently he wiped his moustache on the back of his hands and went to ~~look~~ outside. Laura followed him.

'Prue late, Laura. You did tell her to come early?' he asked.

'Yes. Don't worry so. There's plenty time. Even the buggy ready and waiting.'

'Well, I wish she would hurry up,' Neil said.

'Look! Look! Is Busha MacKenzie, Neil. Come to pay me a visit. Oh, Lord! My hair! It tidy? Quite tidy?'

Laura ran through the drawing-room and into her bedroom. She returned wearing her hat.

'Don't go out to him,' said Neil. He was angry.

'But I must go, Neil. He come to see me. About some——'

'Who is he, anyway? Think he is God! He wouldn't let me have a farthing.'

'Oh! I didn't know you asked him?'

'I didn't.'

'But you said——'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Laura, shut up! If you go out there or let him in here—I'll—I'll never see you again.'

'You don't hate him so, Neil?'

'Yes. He mustn't see me. I don't want him to.'

'All right, Neil. He won't.'

Laura went to the veranda and peered down the drive.

'No! No! No!' she shouted.

She tried to run down the steps but Neil held her.

'Let me go. He's driving off his niggers. How dare he so high-handed. Driving them off when it's me took them in and feed them. Let them come to paybill. I won't pay them a penny.'

'There's Prue coming. Leave him to his niggers. Prue coming. Then after Busha gone, we can go.'

Laura shook herself free.

'You look lovely you so angry,' Neil said.

'Look at her! Aunt Prue. My cousin. Sidling up to Busha MacKenzie and scraping the ground with her knees to him. Aunt Prue! Aunt Prue! Come here at once,' she shouted.

'The fool,' Laura said as Aunt Prue stopped to talk. 'I so furious I could burst.'

'Before Prue come, Laura,' whispered Neil. He put his arms about her and the anger went out of her blood.

Aunt Prue bounced about in the back seat of the buggy on the way to Gayle. She talked all the way though no one answered her, and neither Neil nor Laura wanted to hear about Matt's head.

'So I said to Matt, I said "Matt, Matthew Burton"—oh, Lord preserve us, Neil. You nearly had us over the gully. My heart! Listen to it beating.'

Neil winked at Laura.

'So I said to Matt, I said . . . After all you know Laura, you know fully well what Matt is. No use me going into it. But when you get a man so stony-headed as Matt, well— Oh, Lord, mercy on us. I nearly fell out. You don't got to drive so hard, Neil.'

Aunt Prue puffed.

'Well, as I was saying. So I just had to do something. After all,

you know Matt, and what times are. So I said, "Matt," I said, "Matt——",

'You know when people chatter-box so what they say, Laura?' asked Neil.

'No,' Laura said.

Aunt Prue listened with her tongue caught between her teeth.

'You mean you don't know why people chat too much, Laura?' Neil said.

'You tell me. I not sure.'

'They eat the parson's bottom,' Neil said. Laura laughed.

'The parson's nose, Neil. Not the parson's bottom.'

'Well, is the bottom of the chicken any way you call it.'

He turned round and stared at Aunt Prue. She shrank into the middle of the seat and laced her fingers together. Neil stopped the buggy on the fringe of Gayle.

'I get off here,' he said to Laura. 'Take the reins. Wait here for me going home. And remember—your business is nobody's concern.'

'What he meant, Laura?' asked Aunt Prue directly Laura drove away.

'I guess he meant what he said. My business nobody business but my own.'

'Oh,' said Aunt Prue. 'What we going to Gayle for?'

'You going to sign a paper with me.'

'What sort of paper?'

'A cheque.'

'Money! Well. That I can understand. Things being so bad after the storm. I can't hardly believe you send for me to give me this nice surprise——'

'The money not for you.'

'Oh, no! I never thought . . .' Aunt Prue bit her lip. 'You got to think about signing cheques, Laura. Money too hard to come by.'

'I still got your receipt, Aunt Prue,' Laura said.

'Yes. I guess so,' whispered Aunt Prue.

'Yes.'

Laura stopped before Lawyer Reid's office.

'You know how I need this money on account of damage to Newbiggin—and so on. Don't you, Aunt Prue?'

'Yes.'

'Then don't look so miserable. It make you look hungry.'

Later they waited for Neil. They waited nearly an hour. When he came he pushed Laura aside and took the reins. His breath was heavy with rum.

'Got it?' he asked.

'Nearly,' Laura said. 'He talk private to Prue. She cried.'

'How you mean?'

Laura looked over her shoulder into Aunt Prue's beady eyes.

'Take a few days. Time for me to change my mind.'

Laura giggled.

'But you won't, will you?'

'Depends if you . . .'

He pressed his leg against her.

'It's a bargain.'

'How about . . .' Laura said.

'In a manner, yes. Depends on you. Your little name. Don't mean a thing. The dirty shit . . .'

'Neil!' Laura said, glancing at Aunt Prue.

Aunt Prue's lips were a slash.

'Oh, what the hell, the dirty shit!' Neil said. 'To hell with them!'

They finished the journey in silence. Neil mounted his horse and rode out of Newbiggin with nothing more than a wave of his whip.

'Well!' said Aunt Prue. 'No man would speak such language before me and get away with it.'

'But he did, Aunt Prue,' said Laura. 'And he got away with it too. Samson! Sarah, get Samson. Soon as Miss Prue have a bit of food he got to drive her home.'

'But I thought——'

'On account of Matt, Aunt Prue. I couldn't let you leave him for long. I will give you something to take home and something for your walk here this morning. I will not send you away empty-handed.'

★ ★ ★

The mornings became precious to Laura because Neil came to her then to fuss and fondle her. A few days later, the parcel of money arrived with a long letter which Laura did not bother to

read. She went herself to the post office to sign the receipt for it. Neil counted the money three times before he believed it, while Laura watched him.

'I can't believe it. I just cannot believe it. Two hundred pounds. Oh, Laura! What a girl you are. Two hundred pounds. Don't nobody I would ask but you for two hundred pounds.'

'Well,' said Laura, 'it's sort of a special two hundred pounds.'

'Every pound note here is special. Every single, beautiful one is a special, pretty note. Ah! I nearly forgot. That thing for you to sign. Just a note. No need to read it. Where did I put it? Just a minute. Let me see, now.'

He hunted through his pockets.

'Ah!' he said, taking it from the wallet pocket. 'Thought so. Pen and ink. Must do it right.'

While Laura went to find them he folded the note back over itself leaving only space enough for the signature. He also took a document from his back pocket and he was putting it on the piano when Laura returned with the pen and ink.

'Just sign here,' Neil said. 'Laura Victoria Pettigrew. I always remember you called after the old Queen.'

Laura signed her full name carefully and looked at Neil. She was happy, and happy to see his pleasure. He lifted her off the floor, and kissed her noisily. Then he wrapped up the parcel of money.

'I must go and put this away. Don't want get my throat cut, eh? This is going to come in handy. Very handy.'

He kissed her.

'Behave,' he said, and from the door pointed to the piano. 'You forgot the collateral. It's on the piano top.'

He clattered down the steps. Laura ran out to watch him galloping away. She saw him stop to speak to someone. It was Conchita Morgan. Laura stamped her foot.

'Conchita,' she called.

Conchita looked up and began to walk slowly towards her. Laura was impatient.

'You want me, Conchita?'

'Yes, Miss Laura,' Conchita said. She was not hurrying.

'What is it?'

'A letter, Miss Laura.'

'Well, hurry up, then.'

Conchita approached Laura with the letter held out in her hand. Laura snatched it away. She read it and tore it up.

'Your mother sick she can't come herself?' Laura asked.

'Her knee swell up bad so she can't walk, Miss Laura.'

'Well, tell her I can't do nothing 'bout her roof. She don't think I'm a carpenter, Conchita? The roof not falling down?'

Laura left Conchita and went indoors.

Every morning Laura jumped out of bed, glad for another day, and each day the servants saw the morning's joy change to bewilderment. Neil did not come to Newbiggin. Laura fidgeted about the house, afraid to leave it.

About a week later Laura was pacing the veranda when she heard a horse gallop into the yard.

'Neil,' she said.

She ran into the courtyard with her arms wide and laughter over her face. The servants watched her and whispered. They saw her arms fall as the riderless horse trotted in a circle. Samson swung a hoop of rope. He was trying to catch it. He flung the rope, and the horse was caught.

'Put a saddle on it, Samson,' Laura said.

Samson looked round. He was startled. He had not seen Miss Laura.

The servants watched her leave. She whipped the horse all the way to the gate.

'She hate something, sah,' Samson said to himself.

Laura went to visit Neil at his house. She knew ~~he~~ ^{he} was there even when Mrs. Naunton said that he had ~~hidden~~ ^{run} out. Laura also knew Neil's room. She stamped down the passage and shoved the door open. Neil was lying back in bed paring his nails with a pocket knife.

'Laura,' he said. He put out a hand to her but she drew away. Carefully she shut the door.

'What you doing here?' he asked.

'Don't I got no right to?' Laura said.

'Well, you know. What you come for? Lord! You choose the wrong time to come into my room. You should come at night-time. Then you would see.'

'I been waiting for you, Neil. Every morning I say, "He will

come today". But you don't. So I say, "He busy". But you not. You lying in bed paring your finger-nails. Then I think—I think you will come in the evening. And in the night-time I think you only say you love me——

'Eh?'

'To get hold of my two hundred pound. If you don't love me and won't come to me you can just give me back my two hundred pound. You can't spend it all yet.'

Laura put her hands to her eyes and tears trickled between her fingers. Neil went to her and took her shoulders beneath his palms. He kissed her forehead.

'Don't take on, Laura. I can't bear crying. You not getting round me with crying, you know.'

'I not—not trying to get round you.'

'Very well, then. Smile! Give me a big smile. Smile!'

Laura smiled. Her cheeks were wet and dirty.

'Now what's the trouble?' Neil said. He sat on his bed and patted beside him.

'You don't come to see me no more,' Laura said.

Neil laughed.

'What! Two-three days! Laura! A man busy. I been up to my ears. You know that?'

'Sometimes I don't feel sure no more.'

'Nonsense.'

'What you been busy at?'

Neil looked stubborn, then he relaxed and smiled. He threw a fashion journal at her. It fell noisily on the floor.

'Been buying a few things, for one.'

Laura picked up the journal. Her eyes sparkled.

'Like a ring? A diamond ring. Fifty pound! Fifty pound!' Neil said.

'Fifty! You don't think that too much?'

'Nonsense. Not when a girl got to wear it "till death do us part".'

Laura flung her arms around Neil's neck.

'Careful. I didn't sav it for you, you little savage!'

Laura kissed him all over his face.

'Then I buy some jodhpurs. I can't go out looking like a poor white? Now, can I?'

'No, no. You look beautiful.'

Neil pinched her.

'So, you see, stop worrying about your two hundred. Is only a paltry sum, that. I waiting for something to turn up. Then—you get it back. Every penny. In a few months. Six at the most. I promise. Anyhow,' he said, pushing her aside, 'you got your collateral. I tell you what. Keep that land for the two hundred. How about it? How about it, eh?'

'No,' Laura said. 'I rather have the money behind me. Is a comforting thing to have behind you.'

'Oh, go to the devil,' Neil said. 'You like all the rest. Think I for sale. Two hundred. I got higher bids than that, thank you.'

He pushed his helmet on his head and went through the door. His mother followed him. Laura mounted her horse and rode away.

When she arrived at Newbiggin, she went straight to the piano top. She picked up the document which Neil had left there and opened it. She stared at it and gradually her mouth fell open. The document dropped to the floor.

'But Neil wouldn't do that. That piece ol' land nothing but marl. It dropping into the river.'

She sat on the sofa with her eyes shut. Presently she heard the hum of voices. It struck her that she had heard it and done nothing about it for a week. The labourers were carousing behind the coach-house. Laura went into the kitchen. The women were eating hot coconut drops, shelling pieces into their palms and flinging them into their mouths.

'You lazy, greedy, good-for-nothing lot!' Laura shouted.

She tossed the plate of drops through the window.

'Get off your backsides and do some work for your wages.'

Before she finished speaking, Lucy, Ber'a and Ellen grabbed buckets and slipped through the door.

Then Laura stamped out towards the coach-house.

'Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!' Sarah said.



Chapter Seventeen

The ground was littered with refuse. Laura tripped over a bone and nearly fell. She heard the men laughing and talking, and the high-pitched voices of the women soothing the children.

She went into the coach-house and wrenched the whip from its holder in the buggy. Two or three labourers sleeping on horse blankets in one corner woke up and watched her through half-closed lids.

'Get out to work, all of you. Lazing and eating and sleeping all day long—all day long.'

She swung the whip around her head. The silence was sudden. The people lay on the ground watching their mistress with gaping mouths. As Laura advanced upon them they bounded from the ground and scattered in every direction.

'You coming to paybill, too, I expect,' Laura shouted. 'To get money. Well, then, don't bother. I not paying out one farthing—not one farthing—to one of you. You don't earn nothing, nothing at all. Levi! Look at that banana walk! You do nothing about it? You going to let the trees rot on the ground and breed flies while you waste me money on them? Eh?'

Laura pointed the whip. But only Ram Singh squatting on his heels kept Levi company, and Ram Singh was not bothered by anything.

'Miss Laura—'

'Don't talk to me. How much curry you cook? Answer me! How many goats you kill—to feed those loafers? Is that how you do me work as foreman? I have a good mind to fire you. Fire you! Do you hear? And I can do it too. Just you get my work done quick, Levi. I done playing with you. Holiday over. Over. You understand. Over. Over. And get this yard cleaned up. Look at it. It's a pig-sty. Food everywhere. Rotting banana skins. My God! Do the work you getting paid for, Levi. I don't got money to fling away. You hear.'

As Laura turned to go Ram Singh opened his mouth and a sustained wail came out. It trembled, stopped and started again.

'What's the matter with him?' Laura said.

'Him singing, Miss Laura,' Levi said.

'Well, he don't got nothing to sing over. Go home. Go home,' Laura said.

She went up to Ram Singh and pushed him in the chest with her whip.

'Go home,' she said.

Ram Singh stood up slowly and moved off between Laura and Levi without speaking.

In the evening Levi went to the Chinaman's shop. He had a problem on his mind, and he did not notice the crowd until he tried to enter the shop. The people let him through to the counter, then closed in on him. Levi was afraid. He could sense they were angry.

'One—one small rum, Charley,' Levi said. He could feel a man breathing down his neck. It was a hot, quick breath. Levi lifted the rum, but the man behind him took it and drank it.

'Mass Levi,' he said, with a whine in his voice, 'gimme a rum, sah!'

'Mass Levi got plenty money can buy rum,' another man said, 'but we don't got none.'

'That's right,' the others said.

'Me what? But . . . ' stammered Levi.

'You hear Miss Laura. We don't got no money this week. Mass Levi, you don't stand up for us?'

'You don't know . . . ' Levi said. He tried to edge out of the crowd but found himself pushing against a wall of bodies. He beat on the chest before him.

'What you gwine to do? You can't do nothing to me? I try to help you, so help me God! You know Miss Laura. You know Buckra people, them. Them don't listen. They don't listen a thing. Them don't care 'bout black people.'

'That true,' someone said.

The tension relaxed.

'You hear what Abimalek say. Me tell you, it true. True so-till.'

'That true,' another man said.

'You hear? You hear?' said Levi. He laughed. 'Charley, one small rum. I don't got no money. Me don't to blame.'

'Buckra don't care,' somebody said.

'Zekie baby dead,' a man said.

'Miss Laura got a strong obeah man put something 'pon Newbiggin, man!'

The people laughed. Levi moved carefully to the door and slipped into the night. Presently he heard feet padding behind him. He dodged in front of a tree trunk and waited.

Zaccariah spoke to him.

'Me can see you, Mass Levi,' he said.

'Oh, Zacci! Is you,' Levi said. 'You is just somebody I want to see.'

'Yes, Mass Levi?'

'Zacci, you hear Mass Archie say him buying coconut?'

'Yes, Mass Levi.'

'I got coconut to sell, Zacci. Keep you mouth shut and you get a share. Eh, Zacci? We want money, man.'

'Yes, Mass Levi.'

The men chuckled quietly. Zacci whipped his cutlass from under his arm and chopped the road beneath his feet.

'Yes, Mass Levi,' he said again.

'We must careful, though, Zacci. Don't nobody else must know, Zacci.'

'No, Mass Levi.'•

'You got sense, Zacci.'

Zaccariah's laugh burst on the air.

'You must pick them at night-time and husk them and bag them. And clean up the husk, too. Don't nobody must know.'

'No, Mass Levi.'

'And, Zacci, you got to get them to Mass Archie yourself. Mass Archie will give me the money. That's the way you do things, Zacci.'

Zacci turned his head from side to side. He wiped his nose on his arm and shook his head. The thought he was trying to think would not form itself and he could not help it. But something worried him.

'Yes, Mass Levi. Shit-house,' Zacci said without knowing why he swore.

★ ★ ★

Every day Miss Laura mounted a horse and rode round a section of her plantation. But one day she went to look at the piece of land which Neil had given her as surety for the two hundred

pounds. She did not ride into it, but viewed it across the river. Her heart beat painfully and her hand around the bridle dripped sweat. She saw the steep wall against the river, where it was constantly being eroded. The ground beyond was poorly cultivated. A donkey grazed off patches of grass. A few trees bound the ground together, yam hills sprinkled the surface like boils. Their vines were burnt and weak.

Without a word Laura rode back to Newbiggin.

Berta put her hand over her mouth and her chest heaved.

'What wrong?' Ellen asked. They were standing together in the kitchen door.

Berta nudged Ellen and pointed to Miss Laura riding towards them.

'I think she was the mistress, man. Look! She look just like the mistress.'

'Pshaw!' Ellen said.

'Is true,' Lucy said. She came out of the kitchen to the veranda.

'Miss Laura looking just like the old mistress.'

'Pshaw!' Ellen said. They watched Laura ride to the coach-house.

'Is true,' Berta said. 'She belong mistress. She the mistress's true pickney.'

'But them say . . .' Lucy said. 'You no know what them say?'

'I won't warn you again, Lucy,' Sarah said.

The women went back to the kitchen.

'You scrub the veranda, yet, Lucy?' Sarah asked.

Lucy sucked her teeth. Sarah, Berta and Ellen stared at Lucy. There were three sharp raps on the kitchen door. Sarah looked over her shoulder and stood up. The mortar fell over.

'Tell that man to get off my land,' said Laura.

Sarah stared down the drive. There was a man driving two pack-donkeys through the gates.

'Haleem, Miss Laura?' Sarah said.

'The Syrian man,' Laura said. She took two steps towards the house. She stopped, lifted the veil off her face and looked at Sarah and the women crowding the doorway. Laura's nostrils twitched. Sweat trickled from her eyes like tears.

'You all think I flinging away my money,' she said.

The veil dropped back over her face and Laura continued into the house. She slammed the door after her.

Sarah sniffed. She lifted her skirt and ran towards Haleem, the Syrian. The servant women watched Sarah shake her skirts at him. Haleem stopped and pointed to the house. Sarah shook her fist in his face. Suddenly he lashed the donkeys and turned back to the gate.

'Lawd!' the women said.

As far as Laura could see, the work was going well on the plantation. A new field was nearly finished planting with coffee, ready for the heavy rains. The banana walks were healthy. Wherever she rode, she saw men and women working feverishly. She heard no complaints. But her paybills grew bigger every week. Levi said it was on account of all the work being done. Laura considered that this must be true, because she had very few new people working for her, and they were absentees from Neil Naunton's fields.

Of Neil Naunton, Laura saw little. Twice she saw him trotting his horse past Newbiggin and she guessed his destination. Once he waved his whip at her as he passed on his way from Montrose. She went home, and when Samson was too slow in stabling the horse she hit him about the shoulders with her whip. Since this action angered her she hit him again and again. Yet Samson neither moved nor cried, and she felt no better.

One afternoon towards the middle of December she rode into Newbiggin coach-house and dismounted. She shook her head. The labourers appeared to be working hard. She saw them every day. But today she had the feeling that very little had actually been done. The trenches in the banana walk were still filled in with earth or debris. The drainage was bad.

'Miss Laura,' said Mose.

She looked at him. She was tired.

'Miss Laura,' Mose said, holding out two coconut husks to her.

'What that?' she said.

'Husk, ma'am,' said Mose.

'You real brainy, Mose.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura sighed and loosened the saddle-girths.

'Miss Laura,' said Mose.

She did not answer.

'I find them, Miss Laura.'

Laura paused and shook her head.

'I see plenty more down Water Bottom, Miss Laura. I tell Mass Levi, Miss Laura. I don't thief it, Miss Laura. I don't thief none of your coconut.'

Laura pulled the girths tight with her teeth again. She mounted the horse.

'So you tell Levi, Mose?'

'Yes, Miss Laura. I tell him lunch-time, Miss Laura. He say don't bother you. Him will see, Miss Laura.'

Laura swung out of the coach-house. She sat straight in the saddle. She was tired. A man turned in at the gate. She did not want to see anyone. Presently she could make out the features of Archie White. She kicked the horse and galloped towards him. They stopped facing each other. The horses touched noses. Archie White was grinning. He showed an even row of white teeth. Laura refused to speak.

'You got some nice cattle,' Archie said at last. He heaved himself to sit sideways in the saddle. 'Good grazing here, you know. Good grazing. But you want water. Some water troughs, here and there. Cows like water.'

'What you want?' Laura asked.

Archie White laughed outright.

'You look and sound just like your mother, Miss Laura. Full of hell and damnation.'

'I don't think you got anything to say to me that I want to hear. You can go and say it to Lawyer Reid.'

'Pshaw! That! It's them cows. I keep seeing them cows. You got a little bullock I want buy. You get good prices from me. I got a client want a good, young bullock. That's it.'

He pointed.

'You don't get nothing from me,' said Laura.

'Well,' Archie said, suddenly angry, 'I not begging you, Miss Laura.'

'I got nothing for you—to sell or to give. If you want something from me, Mr. White, you will have to thief it off me.'

Laura shook the bridle and the horse walked towards him.

'I don't want you on my land. It's still my land. Not nothing you and Aunt Prue can do can stop that. You is trespassing, Mr.

White. You didn't come to buy. Like the others, you came to see what you can get out of me.

'Why you don't grow up?' Archie White said. 'Just fancy. I come to give you a hint!'

'Get off Newbiggin. Take your eyes off it. It's my land.'

Archie sucked air through his teeth and spurred his horse. He rode easily, sideways in the saddle.

Outside the gates he stopped to look back at the cattle. Prudence MacKenzie rode past sitting side-saddle. For all the heat, she looked cool. Archie White flicked a coin. He looked at it, shook his head and turned his horse in the opposite direction. But he did not leave. He watched as Laura followed Prudence. When Prudence discovered that she was being trailed, she spurred her horse to a genteel gallop. Laura did the same.

Archie White rubbed some nuts between his fingers. Flakes of skin blew about in the air. He watched the two girls out of sight, grinned and chucked the nuts into his mouth.

Laura forgot Mose. She followed a length behind Prudence. Levi and Zaccariah, hidden behind a sack of coconuts in a deserted hut, saw them pass and dragged the sack into a mat of bushes.

Soon Prudence felt sweat trickling between her shoulder blades. The clothes stuck to her back. She glanced behind constantly, with a furtive movement of the head. Each time, she sat farther forward, urging the horse to greater speed.

Laura was enjoying herself. Prudence's agitation amused her. Before Prudence turned into Naunton Place Laura galloped past her, throwing the dust into Prudence's face.

'Give Aunt Mabe my love,' Laura shouted.

Prudence was startled. Laura laughed and rode on to Water Bottom.

She could see nothing to suggest theft at Water Bottom, though the ground was heavily trampled under some of the coconut trees.

But this, Laura decided, was not sufficient to cause anxiety. She rode around examining the ground and looking up into the trees. And all the while she was thinking of the set of Prudence's bottom in the side saddle.

She turned out of Water Bottom and went back to Newbiggin.

Samson was polishing the buggy in the coach-house. He held Laura's horse as she jumped down.

'Samson,' she said.

'Miss Laura.'

'Samson, I don't think I quite like this saddle no more.'

'Lawd, Miss Laura, what you saying!'

'No. Ladies don't ride astride, Samson. I don't see why I should ride astride. I must look out for a good side saddle. Yes. That's just what I am going to do.'

'But Miss Laura, Missis don't never ride side-saddle, Miss Laura. She don't ride side-saddle since she young, Miss Laura.'

'Samson,' Laura said, 'you is an old fool. I young!'

She laughed happily.

'Look out for a side saddle, Samson. A real nice side saddle, Samson. A real nice side saddle, Samson.'

Miss Laura skipped away.

'Side saddle!' Samson said. He slapped the horse. Then he undid the girths, lifted the saddle off and straddled a horizontal bar with it.

'Side saddle. Side saddle. Lawd, Miss Laura! Side saddle!' he whimpered.

Samson did not like side saddles.

At dusk Sarah lit the lamps and Lucy and Berta placed them in the rooms. Then they said good night to Laura and went to join the prayer meeting in front of the Chinaman's shop. Laura opened the piano and struck a few notes, but the silence they brought was so great that Laura quickly put the lid down. She moved restlessly through the house. On impulse, she decided to put on the dress she had worn to Busha MacKenzie's house. She took her time. She brushed her hair till it lay like metal on her head. Then she heard the buggy wheels.

'Mercy me!' she said.

She glanced at her clothes. She would have no time to remove them.

'Laura, Laura, Laura!' said Neil.

She clasped her hands tightly. Neil rattled the front door, and Laura went to admit him.

'Well, stranger,' she said. The smile went slowly from her face when she saw the anger in Neil's.

'What is it?' she asked.

'You ask that!' he said. He put his hands on her shoulders and

shook her. 'How dare you do that to her? What she ever do to hurt you?—you go and frighten the poor girl out of her wits so I got to drive her home.'

'I can see without words you put out, Neil, but I don't know what you put out over,' Laura said.

'You know quite well what I talking about.'

'Maybe it's a backhanded way of getting more money out of me, Neil. Well, let me tell you——'

'You shut up——'

'Let me tell you, Neil——'

'You hear what I say, just shut your mouth——'

'Don't try shouting me down. I can shout with the best. Right now, I don't got nothing I would give you or lend you. And——'

'Who you think you shouting at?'

'You. Also, I look at that paper—that collateral you give me——'

'That's past business. I talking 'bout Miss MacKenzie——'

'"Miss MacKenzie", ch?'

'Yes. To you. Miss MacKenzie and how you treat her, brazen like any little——'

'Whore?'

'I didn't say that. You did yourself.'

'If you come to pick a quarrel, Neil, say so and get out. I don't know nothing of "Miss MacKenzie", nor don't want to.'

'I suppose that's why you dressed up in that old-fashioned ball gown you wore to the dance.'

'It's not old-fashioned. It's good.'

'Pah! You didn't hear them laugh at you? The nerve of you to walk in looking like that.'

Laura lifted a vase and kept it in her hand for a few moments.

'Leave me alone, Neil. You robbed me. I know that now. But, don't throw up that—that incident at me. That was your doing. You invited me.'

'Me?'

'Yes. You.' Laura spoke quietly. 'You egged me on—and I went, to please you. I wouldn't say nothing about it, but you bring it up. Yes—you. You got me so excited I had to go. It's not a thing I want to remember. Don't speak to me about it again.'

Neil walked to the window and drew the curtains. There was moonlight.

'I didn't bring it up. You bring it up yourself. Trust you to bring up something unpleasant like this so as to dodge round what I come to see you about.'

'You don't come to see me 'bout anything could interest me, Neil. Since you are here—and as I don't suppose I will see you again for a long time—I want my money back. All of it. I want it back. That ring you send off for. Fifty pounds. For her. For her. I want my money back.'

'You can't even behave like a lady,' Neil said.

'That's right. Only Laura Pettigrew's daughter. That's who. No lady at all. Give me my money and I don't care what you and your mother think I am.'

'Oh. No use talking to you. Mother said it was wasting my time.'

'And Prudence—Miss MacKenzie, what she got to say? Your big-bottom lady friend.'

Neil gripped her arm. Laura hit his hand away.

'Don't come here talking about her to me. 'At that dance you didn't stand up for me. You saw me. You turned away and went to dance. You was ashamed of me—' she smoothed the front of the frock—'you was ashamed of my dress. But you come to me—tonight—'

Laura turned away to the piano. She lifted the lid and chopped at a note.

'For God's sake,' Neil said. He moved to the door. 'Stop that row, Laura.'

Laura dropped the lid and put out her hand.'

'The money, Neil. The money. Two hundred pound or I tear that ring right off her finger. You see, I not no lady, Neil.'

'Mother's right. It don't do no good.'

'No good at all, at all. Except I got a chance to tell you 'bout my money.'

Neil walked away and Laura dragged her skirt after him.

'Wait,' Neil said. 'You soon hear from Cohen, Laura. As I said, you got your collateral.'

He climbed into the buggy, whipped the horses and drove away.

'Cohen!' Laura called. 'Who is Cohen!' She ran behind the buggy. It was a dim shape. Its side lamps were not lit.

'I don't know nobody name Cohen,' Laura said. 'Nobody at all.'

'Mistress,' a woman said.

'What is it?' Laura said.

'Mistress. The old man want you,' the woman said.

Laura followed, picking her way carefully.

'Cohen? Cohen?' she repeated. 'I don't know what you mean.'

At one point the woman guided Laura's feet across a plank stretched over a stream.

'But this is—where you taking me?' Laura asked.

The woman did not reply, but she pointed ahead.

'What wrong with the old man?' Laura said.

'The old man want you. The old man waiting for you. The old man ready.'

'Ready? Waiting? Samson?'

Laura shrugged, but began to take notice of her direction. She saw a flicker of light between the trees. It came from a hut. She paused. The woman took her arm and urged her forward. She led Laura to the hut and clapped her hands three times. The matting over the doorway moved and an arm, smeared with white paint and blood and decorated at the wrist with feathers, stretched towards Laura and dragged her into the hut.

Her eyes immediately began to water and thick fumes choked her. Someone guided her to a seat and she sat down coughing into her hand. There was a fire close to Laura's feet. She heard a pot bubbling on it. It gave off the reek of filth. A drum beat in a corner, and a man began to drone a chant. Laura felt his feet patter past her.

Cautiously she opened her eyes and peered between her fingers. She was cold with fear. She saw the fire leaping under an iron pot set on three stones. The fire lay within a ring, marked in lime. A man danced along the ring. For the first time Laura heard a flutter of wings. There was a cockerel in his hands.

Laura knew that she was in Chi-ju-ju's hut. She began to tremble. Immediately the drum beat faster. She looked towards the doorway. A girl watched her with eyes ringed in blood. Her face was spattered with white spots. Laura looked away. The

rhythm of the drum changed. It became faster. To Laura its pitch seemed higher.

Laura tried to stand, but her legs were weak. She opened her mouth to scream, but Chi-ju-ju pointed his staff at her and no sound came out of her throat.

A cat mewed. Something clawed at the matting over the door.
The cockerel crowed.

'The sacrifice!' Chi-ju-ju screamed.

The drum was frenzied. Suddenly it stopped. Chi-ju-ju swung the cockerel over his head. He ripped into its belly with a knife. Blood squirted over the room and into Chi-ju-ju's mouth. He began to chant.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju
Hear Chi-ju-ju!
Rest safe in bed.
Rest safe in bed
Of night.
Rest safe in bed of night.

'Hear Chi-ju-ju.
Hear Chi-ju-ju.
The serpent lost him poison
The monkey lost him britches.
Sleep well.
Sleep well.
Chi-ju-ju speak.'

Laura cowered against the wall. Chi-ju-ju knelt before the pot and stirred it with a bone.

'The ball of a goat.
The eye of a cat.
The hair of a horse.'

He dipped a phial into the pot. Then he wiped it on the goat-skin cloak he wore. He dropped it in Laura's lap and then she screamed. As she stood up, the man sprang away, and the girl ran outside. Laura dragged at Chi-ju-ju's beard. Part of it came away in her hand.

She found herself stumbling in the darkness. She crossed the stream and ran. She saw Newbiggin House clearly in the moonlight. She was sobbing. There was a light in the coach-house.

'Samson!'

She heard him coming and she fainted. But she revived before he reached her. Samson helped her to stand.

'Follow—follow me,' she said. 'The obeah man.'

'Chi-ju-ju!' said Samson.

'Yes. Look.'

In Laura's hand was some vegetable beard.

They ran back through the banana walk together. But long before they reached the hut they could see a glow. It grew brighter. Samson and Laura hurried. Presently they saw the hut. It was burning bright.

When Laura went home, Samson handed her a letter. She turned the letter over and over in her hand. She was not accustomed to receiving mail. She went into her bedroom and looked at herself. She was sprinkled with blood. Soot daubed her nose. Laura began to laugh. She laughed with her image in the mirror. Suddenly she grasped the neck of the dress and pulled. It tore easily. It was old.

Laura stepped out of the dress and left it on the floor. She reached for the letter and was about to fling it after the dress when she saw the postmark, 'Gayle'. She opened it. It was from Lawyer Reid. She glanced at a sentence here and there.

'... owing to pressure of circumstances—as I wrote before—with greatest pleasure—when Mr. Archie White entered my office last week of his own accord to corroborate my findings. It seems he was, when he and Mrs. Pruncella Burton made the claim, quite unaware of the true situation. He begs me to assure you of his best wishes for your future. He hopes to do business with Newbiggin in the future, and trusts that you will not hold this misunderstanding against him—best regards—truly—'

Laura dropped the letter on the blood-flecked dress and threw herself upon her bed. She was soon asleep.

In the morning, Laura and Samson went to see what remained of the hut. They identified the spot by the ring of singed and frizzled banana trees. Of the hut, nothing remained. The earth was ploughed. Only an empty phial, vomited from the ground, lay upon the damp, brown sods.

For several days Laura rested in bed. She was not ill. She was weak. Her legs would not carry her. She saw no one but the servant women. She lay with her body against the wall of Newbiggin House.

Sarah took her food, which she refused. Samson haunted the kitchen.

'You see Missis, this morning?' he asked Sarah a few days later.

'What you want, old man?' Sarah said, drinking the beef tea which Laura had refused.

'She don't want go Gayle, man? No Christmas time. She don't want buy nothing?'

Sarah gave him the leavings of the soup. Samson put the tureen to his lips and gulped it down.

'Miss Laura sick, Samson,' Sarah said.

'Pshaw, man,' Samson said. 'No frighten him frighten.'

Lucy came into the room.

'You know what?' she said. 'I just go into Miss Laura room and she turn me out, man.'

'What business you got in there, Lucy? Is my business go into Miss Laura room,' Sarah said.

'Listen to the John Canoe coming down the road,' Lucy said. 'Hear the drums and the flute.'

Lucy ran outside.

'Don't know, what to do,' Sarah said.

Samson kept quiet.

'She don't tell me do a thing. I don't got a thing but a picnic ham for Christmas.'

'One picnic ham enough one somebody, man,' Samson said.

'Maybe I should tell Levi get a sucking pig ready for kill and two, three fat chicken—she don't eat turkey no more—and a side of beef—'

'Lawd-me-God-oh, Miss Sarah! Miss Laura one somebody, man,' Samson said.

'Get off my mortar, Samson,' Sarah said.

Samson left. He could see the John Canoe cavorting at the gates. They were in full costume. Samson had an idea. It was such a big idea that he stopped to wet against the coach-house before he went down the drive.

The devil leapt into the air and his tail beat the ground. The

fife played a lively tune. Masks leered at Samson. He rested comfortably against the gate before he spoke.

'You come dance for Miss Laura?' he asked. 'The young mistress sick.'

The flute stopped.

'How much?' Punch asked.

'If Miss Laura come out of bed she give you plenty, man. Miss Laura always like John Canoe.'

Punch waved towards the gate. Samson refused to open it. The dancers jumped and pranced.

'You play you flute quiet. Play you fife soft. Beat you drum—ssh!' Samson said. He kept a finger over his lips.

The music became muted.

'When I say go 'way, you go 'way,' Samson said.

The dancers turned back to the road. The fife struck up a tune, the flute and drum followed.

'All right,' Samson said. 'Remember. Real soft. Walk soft. Dance slow.'

Samson led the procession to the house. Even Sarah ran out to watch. Lucy, Ellen and Berta jumped excitedly. The devil advanced upon Berta and butted her with his horns. She screeched and the women laughed.

Samson heard a clap of hands.

Miss Laura waited on the veranda. She wore a kimono over her night-clothes. The John Canoe men somersaulted before her. They dived and jumped and shook themselves. Their feet were noiseless and nimble.

'Dance faster. More music,' Laura said. She clapped her hands and laughed.

The dancers twisted and twirled. The devil whacked the veranda twice with his tail.

'Oh! Oh!' Laura said. She skipped about. 'Come and dance for me again. Come and dance for me again.'

She flung a handful of coppers on the grass, and the John Canoe men grovelled for the coins.

Samson leaned against the house and cleaned his teeth with a blade of grass. He was content.

A man, before unnoticed, handed Miss Laura a letter. She took it.

'It addressed to Mr. Neil,' she said. 'It don't belong to me.'
'Mass Neil say give you, ma'am,' the man said. He started to go.
'Wait. See if there is an answer,' Laura said. She pulled out a single piece of paper.

'In respect of one hundred pounds (£100) loaned at 60 per cent. interest. Interest payable monthly.

'Respectfully beg to remind Mr. Neil Naunton of payment of first interest.

'H. Cohen.'

'Mass Neil give you this give me?' Laura asked.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Well, it don't belong me,' Laura said. She dropped the letter on the floor and leaned over the railings to see the last of the John Canoe men leave the yard.

Laura hurried to the kitchen. She stretched and yawned.

'Sarah, I want a big meal.'

'I will kill a chicken,' Sarah said.

'Salt fish, roast golden-heart breadfruit, and plenty oil,' Laura said. She yawned again.

'Yes, Miss Laura,' said Sarah. She felt defeated.

'Sarah, you know it soon Christmas? Soon my birthday?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'We got anything? Chinaman send me present yet?'

'One picnic ham, ma'am.'

'One? Let me see it.'

Sarah showed her a five-and-a-quarter-pound ham lying in sawdust in a box.

'And all the money I spend with him too,' Laura said.

'He send a bottle of rum too, Miss Laura.'

Laura played with her lower lip. She shut the box and ordered the bottle to be wrapped in paper.

'Get Samson,' Laura said.

Samson, who was hovering close by, soon appeared. Laura gave him the ham and the bottle of rum.

'Wait,' she said, and ran into the house. She returned quickly with an envelope.

'Take this to Miss Prue,' she said. 'A Christmas present. The ham, the rum and this pound note.'

Samson stared from Miss Laura to Sarah. Sarah was frowning. Laura laughed.

'Go on. Take one of the horses. Quick-quick, Samson. Miss Prue Christmas present. Only leave my horse saddled. I'm going for a ride. Lawd, I am tired!'

'You horse saddled, Miss Laur', Samson said. 'I saddle it every morning, case you want it.'

After Laura ate the food Sarah prepared, she mounted her horse and rode out of Newbiggin.

'I feel hemmed in,' Laura said aloud. 'Neil on one side, Prudence on the other.'

She laughed and turned towards Montrose. She wanted to see Prudence again.

The John Canoe men were dancing at Montrose. She could hear the music. She was excited again by their dancing and music as she always was.

She stopped at Montrose gates. The John Canoe men did not dance as joyously at Montrose as they did at Newbiggin. Prudence and her younger sister watched behind a window. Busha MacKenzie and his wife stood stiffly together on the veranda steps. Presently, Busha called the devil. He went quietly. Busha handed him money and his wife and himself turned into their house and shut the door.

'Well,' Laura said.

Nearly every day different bands of John Canoe men came to dance at Newbiggin. Once, a Jack-in-the-Box came and a man on stilts eight feet high. Laura enjoyed their visits.

On Christmas Day, three different bands of dancers came. Laura watched them instead of going to church. She also saw the stream of people sneaking to the back door to eat and drink. She did not interfere with custom. Samson had enough rum to meet their needs.

Suddenly she went to the kitchen.

'You see Samson or Mose?' Laura asked. She was pale.

'Samson out the back, ma'am,' Berta said. She was plucking a fowl.

Lucy went to fetch him. He came dressed in his best khaki trousers and red shirt. He rolled his eyes at Laura. He had already drunk a bottle of rum.

'I want Zekie get a bottle of rum. Tell Zekie get a bottle of rum from Charley.'

'Zekie, Charley. Yes'm,' Samson said.

'Not a big bottle.'

'No, mistress.'

'A small bottle, Samson. Tell Charley give Zekie a bottle of rum so he have a good Christmas, Samson.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura ate alone. The four women filed into the dining-room afterwards and Sarah gave Laura a drawn-thread handkerchief. Laura held it tightly in her hands.

'Happy birthday! Merry Christmas, mistress!' the women said together. Sarah bowed her head. The girls did it as she trained them.

Laura stood up.

'Have a drink, Sarah, Lucy, Ellen, Berta. Is Christmas. Have a drink.'

Laura went into her room and brought out a bottle of port. Sarah fetched, at Laura's command, five glasses.

'Merry Christmas!' Laura said, and drank the glass of wine.

'Merry Christmas, Miss Laura,' the servant women said. But they did not drink.

'Drink. Drain the glass. Do it proper,' said Laura. She filled her glass again. 'Drink. Sarah? Berta, Ellen, Lucy! Merry Christmas! A merry Christmas, a merry Christmas!'

Laura drank her wine and sat down. The women went on tiptoes to the kitchen. There they drank their wine. They drank with their eyes on the ground.

'Don't nobody come, at all,' Lucy said.

'They soon come. Is early yet,' Sarah said.

'Don't nobody going to come,' Lucy said. 'I know.'

'You don't know nothing, Miss Know-all,' Sarah said.

'She dress up so pretty, man,' Ellen said.

'Eh! She pretty, man,' Berta said.

'She the mistress,' said Sarah.

Later Laura felt her way to the drawing-room. She felt ill and the room heaved and rolled and refused to settle. Once she put her head over the window-sill and was sick. A chicken came and

scratched in it. Sarah offered to stay with her. It was lamplight. She had been asleep.

'No, no,' Laura said. 'You—go—home. Is—Christmas. Happy—happy—Christmas, happy—Christmas, Sarah.'

And she giggled. She giggled when she put her face in the wineglass and wine ran down her chin.

'Go—home—Sarah. Nice—Christmas.'

There were two bottles of wine on the table beside Laura. She dozed. When she opened her eyes she saw a man. He was grinning.

'Happy—Christmas,' she said. Her hand fell limp when she tried to wave. She did not want to bother.

She heard the man talking and moving beside her. The window opened and the sound of liquid slapping the ground made her sit up. She reached for the wine bottle. It was gone. The man was emptying it through the window.

'Sit still,' he said. He went through the house and she did not care. The smell of coffee brought her eyes open.

'It was just a fancy I took,' said the man. 'Wish Miss Laura "Happy Christmas",' he said.

He slipped an arm under her shoulder and put the coffee to her lips.

'Want a glass of port,' Laura said. 'Don't want this. Take it—way.'

'Good Miss Laura,' the man said. 'Good girl.'

'Don't I—know you?'

'Not after tonight you won't,' he said.

'I—know—you.'

'Drink this. You feel better.'

'Yes. I—know—you. Monkey man. Nuts. Nutty man.'

'Like nuts. Good for you,' he said.

Laura pushed away the cup and sat up in the crook of his arm and stroked his face.

'Archie White! Archie White!' she giggled. 'Turned you off Newbiggin. All mine. All—my—land. Newbiggin.'

'Drink this coffee. Good for you.'

'You don't—poison me? You—don't—want—my—'

Laura groaned. Archie White moved aside, but nothing happened.

'Serpent. Monkey. What he said,' Laura said. 'A new saddle. A nice—beautiful—saddle. Side saddle. You know what I—what I want?'

'Tell me,' Archie White said.

'Side saddle. Nice side saddle.'

'Get you one,' he said.

'Nice side saddle.'

She drank some of the coffee then and wagged a finger at him.

'My birthday. Sixteen. I want—nice side saddle.'

She shut her eyes, then opened them again.

'Sleepy,' she said.

'You won't get drunk again, alone?' Archie White said.

'So—sleepy. Sleepy. Bed.'

She was asleep. Archie lifted her and carried her to a bedroom. He laid her on the bed, opened the buttons of her shirt and removed her boots.

'Lawd, Miss Laura,' he said, 'tomorrow you won't like this at all. At all, at all.'

He blew out the lights and shut the door behind him. Presently he rode away. He whistled. But now and again he stopped to laugh.

Chapter Eighteen

The year 1917 brought troubles to Laura. She wanted money. The banana crop, after the battering from the hurricane last year, was small and poor. The bananas were short-fingered and meagre. Most of them were rejected before they left the fields as unsaleable. The nine-hand bunches fetched two shillings and under. They could not maintain themselves.

The coffee crop had been excellent and reaped nearly £42 the ton. Laura was proud of this. This year she decided to plant more coffee. In the meantime, cane slips were being set to catch the rains although the cane in the fields did not look too promising. They needed water. The rainfall was too low.

Laura sighed and turned away from the gate. There were banana suckers to be planted out too in more than one field.

Money was going to be tight, but the chance had to be taken. Not for the first time Laura looked down the road towards Neil's house. She needed the money that he had borrowed from her.

'Morning, Miss Laura,' said Archie White.

Laura looked back. She had only a hazy recollection of Christmas night. But somewhere in it she knew she would find Archie White. She blushed.

'Morning,' she said.

'Lawyer Reid write to you, Miss Laura? Hope it didn't cause no bother——'

'Yes. No,' Laura said.

'Your fields looking good,' Archie said. 'Your bananas coming along real nice, real nice.'

'If they don't blow down, if we got the market and if we don't get disease.'

Archie laughed.

'Well, there's the risk, of course. Yes; what would help is more shipping markets. Not only to America but France and England.'

'They is at war,' Laura said.

'Well, after. You could ship them all over the world—all from Newbiggin. Eh? Just think. You could ask your own price then.'

'If. If. If. So many if's,' Laura said. 'If it don't storm. If the fruit will keep green for weeks without maturing and rotting. If we could sell the copra, and the citrus. Look at citrus. If we could sell it. I don't even bother to pick mine.'

'You got your coconut,' Archie White said.

'Is the worst crop I ever known, Mr. White. I can't understand it.'

'But I understand from Levi——'

'Levi don't know everything.'

'But your crop . . .'

'You don't know my crop. I don't expect to make a penny on the cane this year. Too little water to swell it. Oh, well.'

Archie White laughed.

'You right down depressed,' he said. 'I always face the New Year thinking: "This year anything can happen and happen good. Real good."'

'Then what?' Laura asked.

'Nothing. But I feel real good for a bit. You know? Just

hoping. I is what you might call a philosopher. I take it as it come.'

'Well, it's lucky to be that way. But I don't think people who think like you can get on. You got to tempt Providence. That's the way I see it. You can't just trust to chance.'

Archie White laughed.

'You got me there, Miss Laura. Look where I got to! Just buying and selling, moving around from one day to the next. A real rolling stone. No money. But it so interesting! You know. The things I see, the people I meet. Why, I meet a man seen some of the war. Saw heads falling left and right, and a man that finished a sentence after he was dead—he dead so quick, you see.'

Laura shook her head.

'Well, I got to go,' she said.

'Is nice to take a stroll of an evening,' Archie White said.

'Well. Goodbye, Mr. White.'

'I got that side saddle,' he said. He pointed to a donkey behind him.

Laura quickly went into the road. The saddle was on the donkey's back. It was in pale yellow leather with a rose pattern raised on the surface.

'Is beautiful,' Laura said. 'Beautiful.'

'Just turned down an offer for it,' he said. 'Tell Busha MacKenzie I already got a buyer. That's you.'

'Me? But why you think I want a side saddle? I got other saddles. Good saddles, Mr. White.'

'Oh, yes. Well, I just thought maybe you want a side saddle. Ladies like side saddle.'

'Pity I can't buy.'

'Oh!'

'Just don't need it, you see,' said Laura. She stroked the saddle and smiled.

'Well, tell you what. How about a straight swop? That bullock. I know a man would take him.'

'He getting old,' Laura said.

'Be too old soon,' Archie White said.

'That's quite true,' Laura said.

'And then what?' said Archie White.

'But I don't want to sell.'

'You got to know when to buy and sell in your business and

mine. This is a lovely little saddle. I got a man make it in Portland, special.'

'How much?'

'The bullock.'

'The bullock? My bullock?'

'The bullock.'

'I would rather take ready cash for the bullock.'

'A fair swop, Miss Laura.'

Laura bit her lip and rubbed her palm on the saddle.

'All right,' she said.

A few days later Archie White sent a man to drive the bullock off Newbiggin. The bullock was not outside the yard when Levi hurried to see Miss Laura. She was just about to start her morning's inspection of the fields.

Laura sat regally, in the side saddle. Her legs were well covered by a new alpaca habit against the dust. Levi was almost too astounded to speak and just prevented himself from bowing.

'Miss Laura,' he said, 'we find a whole lot of Panama disease, ma'am.'

'Where?' asked Laura.

'Down where we pruning, ma'am.'

Laura flicked the horse with her whip. Levi trotted beside her.

'You want me chop them down, Miss Laura?'

'When I want your opinion, Levi, I will ask for it.'

'Yes, Miss Laura,' said Levi.

He was out of breath and panting. Such a thing as this could lower his prestige if the labourers saw him.

The labourers were waiting for Miss Laura. They made no pretence to work.

'How bad is it?' Laura asked. She dismounted and a man led the horse after her.

Levi showed her the dying trees, one after another.

'How come nobody don't notice this before now?' Laura said.

No one answered.

'Levi, how you don't see it? Is your business to notice things like this, eh? Why you don't answer? I got to do everything myself. And look the damage you done? All of you.'

'If you just chop down the disease trees, Miss Laura,' Levi said.

'Chop them down. All of them, and burn them. Banana no

good. No good at all. How much money they cost to grow, then this!

'You want all the banana chop down, Miss Laura?'

'Yes. I finish with them on this ground. Next week what? Ten more roots. And the next, ten more too. The field dying.'

'What 'bout the new suckers, Miss Laura?' Levi asked.

'I give an order, Levi. Obey me. Get the bananas out of this ground and start to put in coffee. I should have put in coffee before.'

'But, Miss Laura——'

'You back-answering me, Levi?'

'Coffee! Too late now, Miss Laura.'

'I am the mistress,' said Laura.

She lashed at Levi with her whip, then, trembling with anger, she snatched her horse from the man following and led it away.

'One day I gwine to kill her,' Levi said. 'One day, so help me God!'

'Miss Laura don't care 'bout nobody, man,' a sympathizer said.

'Coffee! Think she know something. Coffee! All right. We will plant coffee. We will chop down—and 'burn—the banana them. Good and bad. Then she will see. She will see!'

Levi spat on the ground.

Laura found Neil riding past her gate. She called to him and he stopped.

'I won't keep you,' Laura said. 'I know you busy. But, since I see you so handy, perhaps you won't mind me having a few words with you.'

'I am in a hurry, Laura,' he said.

'So I can tell. You so dressed up. They must be your new mail-order clothes you got on.'

'What you want, Laura?'

'You know what I want, my money.' She spoke rapidly.

'Three months you say. Is more than that. Waiting for something to turn up, you say. It must have. Give me my money, and we won't say no more.'

'The last thing a man should do is do business with a woman.'

'Yes. If that woman isn't a fool. But I am not. I need it. I want it to stock my land.'

'You need it? What about me?'

'You got nothing to do with me. You can go to your father-in-law to be. By all accounts, he got money. I want mine.'

'Well, I don't got it. It's gone.'

'All—all gone? It can't be?'

'It's gone. How much you think three hundred pounds is?'

'Is only two hundred I lend you.'

He laughed and flung his head back.

'Three, my dear business lady, Laura. Three hundred. That document you signed so nice. That for another one hundred pounds.'

'It's a lie!'

'Truth. Truth. You don't get the little demands for interest I keep sending you? You owe Cohen another, let me see, twenty pound interest, now.'

He laughed again as Laura's face puckered. She was trying not to cry.

'Three hundred, all gone. This ring. Look at this. You like this signet ring? Only five pounds. One or two outstanding debts. Clothes. A buggy I bargaining for. You see? Three hundred don't go nowhere.'

'You mean—you spend it all on your back?'

'Well, there's that diamond ring—'

'I will tear it off her hand. I will watch for her and tear it off her hand,' Laura cried.

Neil laughed.

'You know, I believe you mean that. But don't try, Laura. Don't try.'

He touched his horse and waved to Laura. She sat proud in her side saddle until he was out of sight. Then she wept.

Laura saw nothing of Prudence MacKenzie for several weeks. One day, she was returning to Newbiggin from the fields where cane was being cut. It was very hot, and her face and hands which were scratched by the cane leaves burned. Laura was bad tempered, for the yield of sugar cane was even lower than she expected.

Suddenly she became aware of Prudence sitting still on her horse. Laura also stopped. Prudence made a movement to turn back, but when Laura galloped forward, she checked herself and held up her head. Laura stopped beside Prudence. Their horses

stood neck and tail together. Prudence looked away from Laura. She laid her left hand on her hip and the diamond ring winked and glittered at Laura.

'You got a nice diamond ring,' Laura said.

The horses stamped. Laura laughed. 'Why you don't look in my face? Shamed to wear my ring what my own money buy for you?'

Prudence looked sharply at Laura.

'Don't your intended tell you he buy you that ring with my money? Only, he shouldn't do that, eh, Prudence? You got too much pride wear my ring. I tell him I want it back and I want it. Give it me, Prudence. Give it me.'

Laura hummed a tune.

'You got a few more moments to give it me yourself, Prudence. Why you don't take off your hat get all that paste out of your face, eh?'

Laura reached across and grabbed Prudence's hand. Prudence dropped her switch to pull away from Laura. They struggled. Prudence's horse bolted. Quickly Laura lifted her whip and hit at Prudence's hat. It toppled forward over her face before the horse trampled it.

'Next time, then,' Laura called.

★ ★ ★

Laura was bending over a tray of gifts from Aunt Prue when Mrs. Naunton walked in. Sarah took one look at Mrs. Naunton's face and slipped away to the kitchen.

'Just look at them pears,' said Laura. 'Dey't nothing I like like a black-skin pear—unless it's a green, thin-skin pear. And the honey! I swear them two jars of honey must logwood honey.'

She walked past Mrs. Naunton to the door and called Sarah.

'I will have that ripest pear with me dinner. What you got for dinner, eh, Sarah?'

'Your manners deteriorating, Laura,' Mrs. Naunton said.

Laura lifted her brows and looked at Mrs. Naunton.

'Aunt Mabel,' she said with a smile. 'Fancy! I didn't hear you come in, or rap, or anything! Sarah, take the tray out. Fold up that nice tray-cloth—don't it look like one of mine! Put it back on the tray along with two breadfruit—and some cocoa.'

She turned to Mrs. Naunton.

'You white about the gills, Aunt Mabel. You look real vexed up. Take a seat.'

'This isn't a social call——'

'Well, stand then, if you like. I hot. I been working. Is a lot of work getting them niggers to work. Look at my hands.'

She sat down at the table and spread her hands before her.

'Scratched up so much. And if they don't itch and burn.'

'I came to make one more appeal to your decency, Laura. You must have some left, somewhere,' Mrs. Naunton said.

'No. No, I don't,' Laura said. Her chin trembled. 'It all knocked out of me, clean out of me. Don't appeal to my decency, Aunt Mabel. I don't got none.'

'Listen to me, you little chit——'

Laura stood up. 'Don't call me names, Aunt Mabel. I found you out. You and your son—and his intended. You appeal to my decency? I appeal to yours. Tell Neil give me back my money. I don't finish with him and Prudence——'

'What rubbish! You are not fit to breathe her name.'

'If he want her he can have her. But not with my connivance, Aunt Mabel.'

'I promised your mother I would look after you. And I will. From now on, I finish with you. Fighting in the road like a common nigger! Is that the way for Laura Pettigrew's daughter to behave?'

'Yes,' said Laura. She sat down again and put her head on her arms.

'What will her people think of us when you behave—so wantonly?'

'When you go, leave the door open,' said Laura. 'Is hot. Too hot again.'

She did not lift her head as Mrs. Naunton went. Laura banged the table.

'My dinner, Sarah, my dinner,' she shouted. 'The mistress want her dinner.'

Chapter Nineteen

Laura could not find the money to restock the banana walk which Levi had been ordered to chop down. Money from the sugar-cane sales was barely enough to meet the weekly paybills—and these were rising. It seemed that the labourers were working every day and all day long. Laura dressed herself one Monday morning to visit Lawyer Reid at Gayle. She was certain that he would advance the money at a low interest. He had done that, she knew, on more than one occasion for her mother.

But Lawyer Reid refused, and when she shouted that she would take her legal business elsewhere he merely shrugged his shoulders and sat down. A year ago, or even six months ago, Laura was sure that he would not have done that.

When Laura got back to Newbiggin she met Levi. He was wearing new khaki drill riding breeches, stiff with starch.

'How much banana you cut today, Levi?' Laura asked.

'A load, Miss Laura,' he said.

'Only one load, Levi?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'You couldn't find no more to cut, Levi?'

'No, ma'am.'

'I want a word with you 'bout that banana field you chopping down. I will see you there later on.'

'Miss Laura?'

'Not now. Look how the ground parched. Rain. We want rain. You watering the cattle, Levi?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura went into the house and sprawled in a rocking-chair. It was cool. Presently Sarah brought her a tamarind drink. Laura threw back her veil to sip it.

'The postmistress got a mail order catalogue, Sarah?' she asked.

'Mrs. Morgan got one, Miss Laura,' Sarah said.

'I want it. Time I come out of this black mourning.'

Laura lay back in the chair and shut her eyes. She was weary.

'Haleem got nice clothes, Miss Laura, and cloth. Him got nice cloth,' said Sarah.

'I don't hold with travelling Syrians, Sarah.'

'No, Miss Laura.'

Later Laura went to see the diseased banana field and was surprised to see that only a small section had been chopped down.

Levi came grinning to meet her. She stared at the rotting tree trunks festering on the ground, and then looked at the labourers. They were working hard. Laura sighed and tossed her head.

'You don't finish dealing with here yet? Judging by the paybill, this field should done long ago, Levi, and the coffee planted out too. I should soon getting a crop of coffee off here, Levi.'

'Miss Laura, the ground so heavy for coffee, ma'am,' Levi said. 'It get clog up too easy, ma'am.'

'You got trenches only you let them all get silted up. Upon my word!'

'There don't no more Panama disease, Miss Laura. The disease stop.'

'You can never sure, Levi.'

'And look the banana standing, Miss Laura. They look so good and strong—'

'They all start that way. My mind made up, Levi. I want coffee planting here.'

'It don't get no shade, neither, Miss Laura—'

'Stop telling me what to do, Levi. I want coffee here. A good-paying crop.'

'Next October—'

'Now. Soon as I say so. I want the land cleared. Get them trunks away, and plough all them weeds in. In the meantime, don't cut down no more trees till I tell you, Levi. Start the land ploughing.'

'About the huts, Miss Laura. Busha just finish one whole pile of huts, Miss Laura, with zinc roof, Miss Laura.'

'Well?'

'Newbiggin huts so bad, Miss Laura. If they get another blow . . .'

'Is it new huts you want . . .'

'Only—'

'With zinc roof—eh?'

'The old nigger them a-grumble, Miss Laura,' Levi said.

'Let them,' she said.

The next week, the labourers were drawn off the fields and put to felling cedar trees in the hills. All day long their shouting and singing echoed across the valley. The trees were trimmed and sawn up on the spot into wide boards which smelled sweet. Then the timber was carried down the side of the hills to pile up by the roadside.

In a few weeks, there was an imposing stack of green timber, and surreptitiously Levi began to remodel his hut. First he built a floor to it. Then he decided upon an extra room where Maria, his woman, and his children could be kept out of his way.

Finally Laura ordered the beginning of the huts. She wanted six huts built in one long building, and all to have floors. The ground was trampled and the foundations laid. The frame of the wall rose and the ribs of the ceiling balanced on it. Men and women swarmed over the building site, and there was much happiness and laughter. No one knew who would have the huts, and Laura did not care. But the huts were bigger and longer than Busha MacKenzie's. Laura had seen to that.

Fairly soon it became apparent that there would not be enough timber to finish the building. Every night the stack became smaller. The plantation had been left a long time without constant care, and Laura lost interest in house-building. It was June.

'Levi,' she said one day.

Levi, who never strayed far from her if he could help it, promptly flashed his smile at her.

'How much longer they going to take finish this hut?' Laura asked.

'Two-three months, Miss Laura,' he said.

'Impossible. They been too long out of the fields already. Turn them back to work tomorrow. There's that coffee don't planted yet. I can't waste no more time here.'

'But, Miss Laura——'

'Quiet, Levi. I made my mind up. If the huts don't finish, they can't blame me. Look how long they take. And my good cedar board. You stop to think where they gone to?'

'They used up a lot here, Miss Laura.'

'With nothing to show but a skirt round the base of the hut. Not good enough. Bring what left of the lumber down to Newbiggin. You can build me a new veranda. The old one rotted bad.'

Set the others to prune the coffee. They getting too lazy here, playing about.'

Laura did not visit the site again. Next day, the timber was brought to Newbiggin. Holes were dug in the garden, and work on Laura's new veranda started. She kept the people working late and had the veranda finished in two weeks.

The drought broke. In the first thunderstorm a man delivered a letter from Neil. Laura saw that it was a demand notice from the moneylender Cohen. He wanted £40 interest. She sent it back to Neil. An hour later the man brought it back to Newbiggin. Laura wrote 'I will put the police on you' on the envelope and the man went wading through the courtyard mud, back to Neil.

During the night the rain washed away the earth from the foundations of the veranda. Laura was wakened by a clatter as the veranda collapsed.

Next morning Samson sopped the bread in his coffee and looked all round the women. Presently they could endure the suspense no longer.

'Why you so quiet, Samson?' Berta asked.

'I see things with my eyes I can't talk,' he said.

'Lawd, he can't talk!' Ellen said.

'Ellen, if you see what me see you would dead. You would stone, cold dead.'

Sarah gave him more coffee and he pulled it noisily into his mouth. It was hot.

'Go on, Samson,' Berta said. 'Don't mind Ellen. You see something?'

'Rolling calf!' he said.

Ellen dropped her mug and the coffee went over her feet. Sarah shoved her.

'Wipe it up, Ellen,' Sarah said.

Samson laughed.

'What me tell you,' he said.

'You lie,' Sarah said.

'Miss Sarah, I was fast asleep in the coach-house, when sudden I just wake right up. I open my eye and look.'

'Pshaw!' Sarah said.

'And all I see is rain.'

The women laughed.

'You can laugh,' Samson said, 'but you don't hear nothing yet, man. As I say. All I see is rain and blackness. Then what! My Gawd! My Gawd, oh!'

He sipped his coffee.

'What, Samson?' Ellen said.

'You don't want hear, Ellen?' he said.

'Go on, Samson,' Berta said.

'You lie,' said Sarah.

Samson put down his mug deliberately. He was about to leave.

'You want a banana, Samson?' Sarah said.

He took it without saying thanks, and after eating it he continued.

'I see a light. A great light. Like a fire. Two fire.'

'Two light too?' Sarah asked.

'Two light and two fire, Miss Sarah. It come out the banana walk, from the same spot I seen Missis before.'

'Gawd!' the women said.

'Then it rumble. It howl and rumble. Man! You shoulda hear the hoof knock the ground. It come nearer. Closer. Till—I could touch the horn.'

'It don't kill you?' Sarah said.

'No, Miss Sarah. It go right pass me. Man. I get up. I put a crocus bag over my head and follow it round the house.'

'The rain don't put out the fire, Samson?'

Samson huddled his knees and hated Miss Sarah.

'Don't listen Miss Sarah, Samson,' Ellen said.

'The rolling calf paw the ground—hard. Then it gallop right up to the veranda. It breathe on it, then it move off and sudden. Sudden. It charge it, like lightning, with the horn. I hear rip, crash! The veranda fall down.'

He stopped and pecked a corn from his heel.

'What happen to the rolling calf?' said Sarah.

'It sink straight into the ground, Miss Sarah. It sink down and down and down. Till I see nothing but the fire.'

'The rain put that out, Samson,' said Sarah.

Samson did not stop. He went.

Chapter Twenty

Conchita Morgan came up the drive slowly. She stopped once and moved back a step when she saw Laura walking round the veranda. Conchita bit her lip and wiped her hands on a rag. She saw Samson lead a horse into the courtyard. Then she began to walk forward again.

Presently Laura came out and mounted her horse. Conchita stopped and covered her mouth with her fingers, for Miss Laura was beautiful in her yellow dress, yellow hat of straw and veil.

Samson, Sarah and the three other women servants curtsied as Laura cantered side-saddle down the drive.

'Me know where she going,' said Lucy.

'G'long,' Berta said.

'Pshaw, man. She gone ride Busha MacKenzie. Every day she gone ride Busha MacKenzie,' Lucy said.

'Busha and Miss Laura Buckra,' Sarah said.

'Look! Miss Conchita stop Miss Laura,' said Samson.

'Is Conchita mother Miss Laura get the journal from she get them mail order clothes out of,' said Sarah.

'Miss Sarah, you see the red frock, and the blue one! Lawd-oh! The blouse so thin with lace, you can see right through it!' Berta said.

'Conchita a-cry,' said Samson.

Conchita stood in the middle of the drive rolling her head in her arms.

'Conchita and Mass Neil——' Samson said.

'Enough, Samson,' Sarah said.

'Well, is true, Miss Sarah,' said Samson. He began to wheeze and his arms jerked up and down. 'Is jealous you jealous, Ellen?'

Ellen jumped to her feet.

'Ellen! Is knock you gwine knock the old man down like the rolling calf what him see knock down the veranda?' Sarah said.

Ellen breathed hard.

'You is a awful liar, Samson,' said Sarah. 'None of them labourers what repair the veranda don't see one hoof where the rolling calf paw the ground.'

'God my witness,' said Samson.

'Well, it do it one time, it will do it again,' Lucy said.

'It won't never do it no more, Lucy, Miss Laura stand up and watch the post go down into thick mortar herself. Eh, Samson?' said Sarah.

Samson hobbled off down the road to Charley's shop for a small rum. If there was one person who could make him feel like a rum, a big rum, it was Miss Sarah. He met Levi Jones at the Chinaman's shop. Levi was in a white drill suit and powerful big boots.

'Buy you a drink, Samson?' Levi said.

'Me just going,' said Samson.

'All right. I just come back from Gayle,' said Levi Jones.

'Think you was going to funeral,' said Samson. 'You so dress up.'

'No. I go and join the bank, man. You get to my position—you join a bank, Samson. I buy a pig too. I gwine to fatten it up and sell it. Make money. Man like me got to make money. Eh, Samson?'

Samson nodded. If there was one thing ~~he~~ he hated, it was white nigger. He went back to Newbiggin to the saddle in the coach-house. He would give it a good oiling and a general cleaning. Or, perhaps, he would lie down with the saddle for a pillow and have a sleep.

★ ★ ★

Laura met Neil on her way back from Montrose. She had seen Prudence again, hiding behind the star-apple tree. This was the third time that she had seen Prudence there. Laura rode slowly with one hand on hip and the other holding the bridle.

'Hello, Laura,' said Neil.

Laura jerked to a stop. She had been thinking of Prudence.

'You frighten me!' she said.

'You dreaming. You looking very pretty. Very pretty.'

Neil rode his horse round her.

'Your intended waiting for you—behind there.'

'Prudence?'

'Don't look like you don't know. I seen her there before.'

Neil laughed.

'All you girls the same,' he said.

Laura lifted a corner of her lip.

'You don't know what I got to put up with, with Prudence——'

'Phew! It hot. Everything scorch up.'

'And that father. Laura, you don't know how he mean. Not like you. He don't got nothing but a sum-book for a heart.'

'I don't want know 'bout your private business, Neil. I don't see you for ages. But, that don't matter. You know? You is a oddity. You don't change. You don't change at all. You still the same. Goodbye.'

'No. Wait, Laura.'

He laughed. Laura rubbed her thigh slowly. Neil rode closer and covered her hand with his.

'I been to see your Lawyer Reid at Gayle,' he said.

'Oh!'

'You know, Laura. You can't know how lucky you is? The resources you got right under your hand!'

'I know what. You got my money for me. Two hundred. You said three, then six months. Well, is eight months now. You got me money to pay me?'

'All that nagging again!' Neil said. Laura shook off his hand and stared ahead. 'Don't look so haughty and glum. You still love me. You can't change so quick.'

'Prudence waiting.'

'Oh, blast Prudence. You don't know how MacKenzie mean, Laura. You wouldn't credit it. He wouldn't lend a counterfeit coin to nobody. Talk about dowry! A pittance. A hundred. Pshaw! When I want it now.'

'What you want with Lawyer Reid? You tell him the money I get out of the bank you spend on rings and clothes and buggy——'

'The buggy don't paid for yet. But there is one or two things I find out for you should make you pleased.'

Neil twisted his moustache and winked at Laura.

'Told him you sent me to him.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Oh yes. He believed me too. He know we good friends—you and me for a long time. Asked him about that business with White and your Aunt——'

'How you hear of that?' Laura said.

'I got ways.'

'I going.'

'No. Listen. Seem the old goat know all along it okay else he wouldn't give you that money—or so he claim. Traced everything. Said he wrote you in a letter when he send you that two hundred—'

'I didn't read it.'

'No, you didn't send him no answer neither. But, listen, Laura. Nowhere don't mortgage on Newbiggin. Nowhere at all. You can get—God! almost anything. Money. You can get a mortgage easy—easy on your house or lands.'

'I don't want one.'

'But that's what I telling you. Just one hundred and that skin-flint wouldn't shell out.'

'You not asking for money?'

'One hundred would see me for the time, anyway,' said Neil, dropping his hand on her knee and rubbing it. 'One hundred would see me. There's that buggy . . .'

Laura laughed and stopped. She peered into his face. His hand moved to her arm. She laughed again. Laura jerked her arm free, kicked her horse and went galloping home.

Neil watched angrily. Then he dug his spurs into his horse. He soon saw Prudence. She ran out to him. But he remained loftily on his horse.

'Prudence, leave your window open tonight,' he whispered.

'Papa!' said Prudence.

'Forget Papa. Open your window to me—tonight. I need you. I need you so. I must have you—all costs.'

He chucked her chin with his whip and left her trembling in the road. That night, when the lamps were doused and the stars were bright, the curtains stirred in an open window at Montrose.

★ ★ ★

Every day Laura rode as far as the star-apple tree. Sometimes she saw Prudence. One day, towards the end of July, Laura saw Prudence crying. She stopped her horse.

'Why you crying?' said Laura.

Prudence held up her head. Her eyes were frightened. She

tumbled under the wire behind her and went floundering through the banana walk. Laura lashed the horse. She galloped to Montrose, dashed through the iron gates and rode a full circle before the veranda and a groom. Then she went home.

A few weeks later, Laura returned from the fields to find Aunt Prue relaxing on the veranda beside a hand of ripe bananas. Laura walked past angrily to her room, leaving Aunt Prue mottling and stammering. Later, Laura went out to supervise the coconut picking. Aunt Prue was still there when Laura returned. Laura's anger was gone.

'What you want, Prue?' she said.

'Why, Laura——'

'I said, what you doing here? I didn't send for you.'

'Well—I thought, you don't got no one to see after the mending——'

'Mrs. Morgan do my mending.'

'Well—there's the darning. You never did like a needle, Laura.'

'You want put some meat on you, Prue. You is very thin,' Laura said.

'Times hard——'

'I know 'bout that.'

Laura went into her room and washed. She came out in a long pair of striped bloomers, pulled in at the knees and elbows with ribbon. Her hair was caught in a cap with a tassel. ,

'Laura! It against the law, against the holy Bible!' said Aunt Prue.

'Pshaw!' Laura said.

'Trousers! You don't mean no one to see you in them?'

'It called a bathing costume. I going to bathe in the river.'

'I won't stand for this!'

'You can stop a week. Then you must get back to Matt. How's Matt's head, now?'

'Matt? Matt? One week? I don't know what your dear mother would say.'

Laura laughed. She went back to her room. Presently Aunt Prue and the servant women saw her run through the banana walk in her bare feet to the river.

★ ★ ★

Laura supervised the coconut picking the whole week. The yield was the smallest she had ever known. As Levi pointed out to her, some years were smaller than others. But Laura was not satisfied, nor was she pleased with Levi's explanation that there could have been no theft since there were no telltale husks. She was thoughtful at lunch, and ate little. But she watched Aunt Prue stuffing herself.

'You been up to your tricks again, Aunt Prue?' she suddenly asked.

Aunt Prue dropped her knife and a piece of meat skidded to the cloth.

'No, Laura. I been up to nothing,' she said.

Laura made no reply so she picked up the piece of meat and pushed it into her mouth.

'Why you made up those lies with Archie White, Aunt Prue?'

Aunt Prue looked sick. She put her hands in her lap and rubbed them together.

'I really don't know, Laura.' She bowed her head. 'Directly I see that White—you know I never seen him since you was—you know he was in Panama? For all I know you? father living.'

Aunt Prue found a handkerchief and teased it.

'That no reason,' Laura said.

'I don't got one, Laura. It—it came over me. I had to try. I know nothing would come of it. Lawyer Reid send for me last year. He said, he said a lot of things he don't got a right to, same as when you cashed that cheque.'

'You think he did wrong?'

'Yes. He did wrong. After all, it was possible. It was just possible.'

'You wanted Newbiggin?'

'Is the only home—I had.'

'You got Matt.'

'Matt! Your mother made me take Matt. To get me out of here. Laura was like that. She liked keeping things for herself alone.'

Laura sighed.

'You going home tomorrow,' she said.

'But—I only just come!' said Aunt Prue.

'Tomorrow is a week. I said one week. You don't remember?'

'Sides, you been thieving my coconuts again. I told you what I would do before. You not safe, to keep about Newbiggin.'

'Laura, Laura! It's a lie. A lie! No. Not this time. Before, I— I admit. A nut or two. Only a nut or two. But I don't, now. Just ask Busha MacKenzie. He'll know. Laura, believe me. Please.'

She rose from her chair and stumbled to Laura.

'It must you,' said Laura. 'The coconut trees stripped. You can tell. It must you. Last time it happen, you was here too.'

'On the Bible. On the Bible, Laura. Is not me. Not this time.'

'I can't prove it. You can't prove it. Leave it. A big question mark. Anyhow, tomorrow, you go back to Matt.'

Aunt Prue was whimpering.

'I got to get dressed,' Laura said. She stood up. 'It's paybill time.'

Laura went to her room. While she was dressing, Parson Bickett arrived and Aunt Prue received him on the veranda. She was in the middle of relating to him how she had been turned out of her home when she gasped. Parson followed her eyes to the door. He began to rise from his chair.

'Laura!' said Aunt Prue. 'Our Father which art in Heaven . . .'

Laura moved out of the doorway. Parson rose to his full height.

'What wrong, Aunt Prue? See a ghost?' she said. 'You turned quite white.'

'Remarkable! Remarkable! Quite remarkable,' said Parson.

'How do, Parson?' Laura said.

'Is the clothes,' said Aunt Prue.

'Remarkable. What a likeness,' Parson said.

'What likeness?' asked Laura.

'To your mother, Laura. It's—it's the—— I don't know,' Aunt Prue said.

'How you been, Parson? I never see you at all, at all.'

'Ah, Miss Laura. That is so. That is so. You don't come to see me, so I come to see you.'

'What a pity I can't stop to talk to you, Parson. You pick the wrong day. Talk to Prue, here. She like talking.'

'Could I have a word with——'

'Not today, Parson. Talk to Prue.'

'We never see you at the kirk, Miss Laura,' said Parson.

Laura buttoned her gloves and went down the steps. As soon as she was out of hearing Aunt Prue began.

'See what I mean, Parson? Full of pride and conceit! You see yourself.'

Parson made his excuses and left. He passed Haleem, the Syrian, driving his donkeys up the drive. Aunt Prue beckoned Haleem to hurry. He unloaded his hampers quickly on the veranda, and Aunt Prue's hands clawed through the merchandise. There was a piece of yellow silk with a broad satin stripe which she kept on her lap.

'I'll keep this,' she said. Her heart throbbed with excitement. 'I'll give you two shillings down.'

Haleem smiled. He would make any concession to get a foothold in Newbiggin.

* * *

September brought a letter from Cohen threatening legal action unless he received £50 interest due on the £100 borrowed by Neil. Laura tore the letter into small pieces. She put them in an envelope with a letter to Neil demanding repayment of her loan. She went into the courtyard and shouted for Levi. Samson went to fetch him.

'Levi,' said Laura.

'Yes'm,' Levi said.

'I don't care what you do. Put the labourers on half-time or sack half of them. Money, money, money! Nobody pulling their weight.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'No., Miss Laura,' said Laura. She stamped her foot. 'I surrounded by thieves. Everywhere. Get out of my sight. Reap something. You don't got nothing bringing in money?'

'Miss Laura——'

'Clear out!'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Levi went home to Maria. Maria had a new baby and another on the way. Levi pulled his lip and pondered. His children squalled. He called Maria. When she came, he slapped her face.

'You shut up them pickney yelling,' he said, 'or else . . .'

A baby, balanced upon the mound of her stomach, opened its eyes. It screamed.

'You hear me?' Levi shouted.

'Mass Levi,' said Maria. She dropped her breast in the baby's face, and its mouth groped for the nipple and clamped it.

Levi relaxed in his cane-seat chair.

'You know Haleem?' he said.

'Yes, Mass Levi,' said Maria.

'Bshaw, man! I order some patent leather shoe.'

'Mass Levi! No! You never.'

Levi shrugged. He liked her reverence. He went into his back garden and confronted Zaccariah.

'Zacci,' said Levi.

'Yes, Mass Levi.'

'You got to work harder, Zacci. Or I will sack you, Zacci.'

Zaccariah distended his nostrils.

'Miss Laura say put you 'pon half-time or sack you, Zacci. You want me keep you on, work harder, Zacci.'

Zaccariah rammed the fork into the ground.

'You don't answer, Zacci!'

'Yes, Mass Levi.'

'That good, Zacci Maria, chop a coconut water for me. It so hot and still, it must gwine rain.'

Levi Jones sighed with contentment. He heard a buggy going past his house and looked through the front door. He saw Miss Laura sitting straight in the back with her arms folded. Samson was driving.

'Eh?' said Maria. 'Miss Laura.'

'Shut your mouth,' Levi said. He boxed her lips and a bead of blood appeared. Levi shivered.

Laura wanted to get out of Newbiggin in the buggy. It was months since the buggy had been used. Samson was pleased. At first, Laura sat with her eyes closed. When she opened them, she exclaimed. Samson looked back.

'Samson! Don't those Mass Neil niggers breaking stones?'

'Yes, Miss Laura,' said Samson.

'The fields!' Laura said. 'Is a long time I don't come down here. Is all grass.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'Don't nothing done?'

Samson did not reply. They passed a woman astride a stone-heap.

'Don't she belong Newbiggin, Samson? I know her.'

'Is Zekie woman, Miss Laura.'

'Zekie woman? Zekie pickney dead,' said Laura.

Rain began to tumble. It bounded into the buggy and wet Laura.

'Make the schoolhouse, Samson. It dark so sudden. We near the school. Hurry!'

The buggy raced to the school and Laura ran into the building. She was already wet through. Mr. Simpson, the headmaster, ordered the classes to stop and the school to stand. He came to Laura and bowed.

'Miss Laura,' he said. 'Happy the rain which brings you here.'

Laura shook her skirt. Mr. Simpson moved away and clapped his hands.

'Children! Children! "Where the bee sucks." Nathaniel Brown! "Where the bee sucks." One, two, three, four.'

'Where the bee sucks,
There suck I,
In a cow-slip's bell I lie . . .'

the children sang.

'Take over, Nathaniel,' said Mr. Simpson.

He turned to Laura and smiled.

'Nathaniel Brown is a good boy, Miss Laura, he will go far. Or should I say, "He should go far".'

'The rain slacking off,' Laura said.

'He got his Third Year Pupil Teacher's, Miss Laura.'

'He bright,' Laura said.

'Too bright again, Miss Laura.'

The song ended. Mr. Simpson clapped his hands.

'Cyrus Morris! Stand out. This is another bright boy, Miss Laura. Say "The Boy stood on the burning deck!" Classes, clap hands.'

Cyrus Morris recited to the clap of hands in a voice which fluctuated.

'Teaching is an art, Miss Laura. It's an art. Not everyone can appreciate that. Not everyone can learn it. Now, Miss Laura. Take Nathaniel Brown and Conchita Morgan, Miss Laura. Conchita turned flighty. Besides she's not a good teacher. She's got

moods. But Nathaniel, now. A patient boy and willing. Learning all the time. If he only had a chance! Miss Laura, 'we don't got no one else but you to call on. You are, in a sense, the village.'

'What's that?' said Laura. She was watching Conchita, who was watching the other pupil teacher, Nathaniel Brown.

'You is the whole village, Miss Laura, in a manner of speaking. Newbiggin been here a long time.'

'Newbiggin been here all the time, Teacher Simpson,' Laura said.

Mr. Simpson laughed.

'True, true, Miss Laura. That's right, of course.'

The recitation stopped and the clapping ceased. The children began to whisper. They were becoming restless.

'Silence!' shouted Nathaniel Brown.

'What a voice, Miss Laura, for a teacher. Nathaniel could make an inspector of schools!'

Laura examined Nathaniel Brown.

'Then why he don't go to Mico College and train for a teacher?' Laura asked.

'Funds. We would approach Busha MacKenzie for help—but, he is not you, Miss Laura. You is the village. He is a stranger here.'

The rain stopped. Laura moved outside. Water dropped noisily from the roof. A chicken clucked.

'Send Nathaniel Brown—round—to see me. After school. I don't promise nothing. Nothing at all. I will have a talk with him.'

'Nathaniel, Nathaniel Brown,' said Teacher Simpson.

When Laura drove off she looked back and saw the teacher and Nathaniel Brown jamming the doorway.

'Samson,' said Laura, 'when we get home. Tell Levi Jones—don't lay off nobody. Nobody at all. At all, at all. I is the village.'



Chapter Twenty-One

Laura awaited Nathaniel on the veranda. The air was cool and fresh. She closed her eyes. The turkeys blustered. A donkey brayed. She heard Nathaniel stamp in his heavy boots to the veranda, and she kept her eyes shut.

'So you want to be inspector of schools, Nathaniel?' she said.

'No, Miss Laura. Teacher, m'm,' Nathaniel said.

The blue of Laura's eyes poured over him. He swallowed.

'Why?' she asked.

'I want to teach, Miss Laura.'

'Why?'

'I like to learn children, Miss Laura.'

'Make you feel powerful, eh?'

'I like to teach, Miss Laura.'

'And you don't want be inspector school?'

'No, Miss Laura.'

'Then, Nathaniel Brown, you can go home. For either you is a liar or you don't got no ambition. Is a waste of time spend good money—waste good money 'pon somebody don't got no ambition.'

She shut her eyes. Something blocked Nathaniel Brown's throat.

'It—it might just work that way, Miss Laura, with God's help.'

'You is a hypocrite too.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura stood up. She went to lean on the veranda railings.

'Yes. You is a hypocrite, else you don't 'gree with every word I say, just because I catch you out before, Nathaniel Brown. I don't like liars. I don't like hypocrites. Never. You don't deserve go Mico College and waste money. What you think you could teach at school or say you made into a inspector of schools? There's no end to it. You might even make a parson, Nathaniel. A parson. And before you start, you lie and turn hypocrite!'

Nathaniel slapped his face where an insect stung him.

'You boots pinch you, Nathaniel?'

Nathaniel ground his teeth.

'Yes—yes, Miss Laura.'

'See how hard to speak true, Nathaniel, and how easy at the same time, eh?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'You carry it in you hand, Nathaniel, till you come close the house, eh?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

'What you called? Natty?'

'I don't like called Natty, Miss Laura.'

'Snap. How far away France where the war fighting?'

'Four thousand miles, Miss Laura.'

'How far England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales?'

'Four thousand miles, Miss Laura.'

'How far America?'

'Three thousand, Miss Laura.'

'Natty? I gwine to look them up, you know.'

Nathaniel shuffled.

'They might a mile or two out, Miss Laura.'

'Then after you will marry a half-Chiny girl or a cool-skin girl with Indian blood. For the hair. Eh, Natty? For the hair,' Laura whispered. She laughed.

'I enjoyed myself, Natty. I think if you try you could be honester. You got to be honest to teach. Eh? "Honesty is the best policy." Look on the school wall. "Honesty is the best policy." Come and see me again. I'll see if I can do something. I don't promise.'

'Thank you, Miss Laura,' said Nathaniel Brown, laughing for the first time to Miss Laura's face.

'Not yet. Remember honesty. I said I don't promise, but I'll see. Time you go to Mico and come back you talking algebra.'

During the weeks which followed, Laura was very busy watching the labourers. She rose early and worked until the sudden twilight. But still something evaded her. Although the labourers were working only part time the bills increased. She checked and rechecked Levi's books, but could detect no discrepancies.

'Come the new year,' she told Levi, 'I will make changes. Then, Levi, you can go and dirty your own hands.'

The coffee that she had forced Levi to plant in the banana walk

died. But the bananas were luxuriant with no sign of disease. Levi followed her one morning to inspect the ground. It had rained during the night and mud clogged her shoes so that her feet were heavy.

'We will plant cane here,' Laura said. 'That's what we will plant, Levi. Why you made them fools plant coffee? You don't know the ground too heavy?'

'Miss Laura——'

'My mind made up. Start clearing the ground. We will plant cane.'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

She heard Neil call and she turned round. He came close to her. His skin had a yellow tinge.

'I must have a word with you, Laura,' he said.

'What you waiting for, Levi?' Laura asked. She pushed him. Levi lost his balance and fell into the mud. She laughed as he hoisted himself to his feet. His clothes and palms were coated with mud.

'You got your hands dirty, Levi,' she said.

'Laura,' said Neil. He did not laugh. 'I got a proposition to put to you. Let's get to the point.'

'A clean one, this time,' Laura said.

'You facetious, Laura. Listen. Newbiggin own big lands here. How it would be you could own more?'

'Ah! More collateral.'

'Land, Laura. Land to expand in. I mean—look at you. Look what you done to this place. Coffee. Who would dream coffee would grow here?'

'It didn't.'

'But, don't you see? That don't matter. You see a chance to speculate or take a chance or try something fresh—and you take it. There don't no other way to expand.'

'I not expanding,' said Laura.

'Yes, you are. And you keep on like that you own up the lot of us before you're done. I know you. I know Laura Pettigrew. You will expand because you got to. Being yourself.'

'Well,' Laura said, 'there's something in that.'

'Land—that's how you expand.'

'You got anything special in mind?'

'Yes. My land.'

'Your land? You joking? I would afraid to touch your land. Collateral an' all,' Laura said.

'You afraid take a chance. You disappoint me. Well, I'll see MacKenzie. I promised give you first chance buy it.'

'Just a minute,' Laura said. 'What land?'

'Joining yours on the south side.'

She picked up a stick and chewed it.

'When you giving me back my money?' said Laura.

'If this deal I got in hand go through—real soon now.'

'Um. How much an acre?'

'Fifty pounds.'

'Fifty pounds! We wasting time.'

'To MacKenzie of course. To you—thirty pounds. Ten acres.'

'You mad! I don't got thirty pence.'

'Get a mortgage. You can get a mortgage.'

'No.'

'Laura——'

'No. No. I in^{an} no.'

'And lose the chance to expand?'

'No.'

'Twenty! That's fair.'

'I couldn't do ten. No.'

'All right, then. Ten. Ten. What a hard business woman you turn out to be, Laura.'

Laura paused, then she laughed.

'Ten pound the acre and you agree give me back that two hundred. I need it real bad. Supposing we get another blow next month? We got to careful, Neil.'

'See about that mortgage right quick, Laura, before I change my mind and withdraw my offer. Promise?'

'All right.'

Laura informed Lawyer Reid that, as she wanted to buy land and expand, she intended to get a mortgage on Newbiggin House and that parcel of land surrounding it. But she was unprepared for his reaction. He would have nothing to do with it, and strongly advised against such a disastrous course. At the end of an hour, Lawyer Reid promised to set the legal machinery in motion.

The coffee crop began, and an endless line of men and women moved with baskets filled with coffee pulp to the barbecue on Newbiggin land. With Neil, it was different. His coffee had a blight and the yield was low. He was in the Chinaman's shop one night when Archie White entered. Neil finished his rum and his joke. He looked at Archie White and went outside. Archie White followed.

Next day, Archie White drove off Neil's cows. He took them to Newbiggin and turned them loose in the yard. Laura saw them and liked them. Archie left them. He was not perturbed. He knew Miss Laura would pay sometime. Newbiggin could always pay.

Stormy weather time came again, with never a sign of wind. Laura rode the fields aimlessly, watching the skies. But the skies remained serene. Only occasionally did they grow grey with thunderstorms.

One afternoon, as Laura was on her way to inspect the coffee-line moving to the barbecue, she became aware of Conchita running after her. Conchita caught up with Laura after a few minutes and panted as she struggled to keep pace with the horse.

'Miss Laura, give me a job, Miss Laura,' she said. 'I beg you a job. I will do anything.'

'You finish teaching Conchita?' asked Laura.

'I—I got the sack, Miss Laura.'

'Who done that?'

'Parson, Miss Laura.'

'So! And nobody don't even tell me. Why he sack you, Conchita?'

'I in the family s way, Miss Laura.'

'You what?'

'I——'

'I hear you, Conchita. What you expect me to do, then?'

'Give me a job, Miss Laura.'

'I got to set an example, Conchita.'

'I will scrub, Miss Laura. Sew. I can sew. I will do anything.'

'I got servants already, Conchita.'

'I will do anything, Miss Laura.'

'I can't help you, Conchita.'

Laura whipped the horse, and galloped away from Conchita.

'But you got to help me, Miss Laura. You got to.' Conchita's voice became shrill.

The labourers stamped a path from the coffee bushes to the barbecue. Their feet dragged for the day was sultry and still. Zaccariah was king on the barbecue as he caught the baskets of pulp and scattered the seed around him. He grunted as he worked and sweat sprinkled the coffee as his arms moved. He wanted to go home, so, to pass the time and to speed the flow of pulp, he began to extemporize a jamma song. Immediately the labourers responded. Their movements became rhythmic as they brought in the chorus, 'Hold 'em Joe' whenever Zaccariah finished a line. The coffee came quickly.

'You know what the Buckra want,' Zaccariah sang.

'You know what the Buckra want,
The Buckra want kill.
The Buckra want kill.
The Buckra want knock down.
The Buckra want knock down.
Buckra want money.
Buckra want money.'

The labourers put down their empty baskets and crowded round the barbecue. They clapped hands and stamped while Zaccariah jumped and postured. His lips dribbled, and his eyes grew round.

'You know what old nigger want.
You know what old nigger want.'

'Yes, Zaccariah,' said Laura, 'I know.'

She swung her whip round and round her head. Zaccariah remained crouched, watching the whip, knowing what would inevitably follow.

Laura brought down the whip on Zaccariah's back. His feet slithered in the coffee pulp, and he fell. The labourers snatched their baskets and ran away. Slowly Zaccariah rose to his feet. He looked at Laura all the time, and Laura watched him. Then he jumped to the side of the barbecue with his palms extended. His palms were pink. He stopped. The weal rose in his back.

'Now. Rake over the coffee,' Laura said.

'Yes, mistress,' Zaccariah said. He wanted to hurt her for all the hurt she and her kind gave him and his people. But he restrained himself until a more suitable time when his resentment would be uncontrollable.

Conchita relieved the tension. She came running to Laura. Conchita dragged on Laura's stirrup. Laura kicked her feet free.

'Don't follow me about, Conchita,' she said.

'Miss Laura, you got to help me. Moomah washed her hands of me and drive me out. I don't got nobody, Miss Laura——'

'You mother don't want you—what make you think I want you, Conchita?' said Laura.

'Miss Laura, have pity, ma'am. Have pity.'

'Go to your man, Conchita, get what sweet you—you harlot, and leave me alone. You mother want work, she can come for it.'

'Miss Laura——'

'All you loose women, you is all alike. Then you come whining.'

Zaccariah picked up the rake and smoothed over the pulp. He was grinning.

'You hypocrite, Miss Laura, I put my curse on you for ever and on this land and on your crops. Set yourself up as the Almighty! You think we don't all know? We all know who you is and what you is. We don't forget nothing. Riding about like you own the earth on your side saddle and we was dirt.'

'That's right, Conchita. Dirt. Harlots is dirt. Zaccariah! The day sort of gone still. Watch the coffee. I don't want it get wet.'

'There won't no storm, Miss Laura,' Zaccariah said. 'Is just weather.'

'Well, keep your eye on it and take off the pulp if it look like rain later. I don't want it wet.'

Laura rode away.

'Listen her, Zacci. She don't want her coffee wet—so she can make more money buy more side saddle. I hope it storm. I hope the coffee wet-up. I hope the whole place wet-up and Newbiggin fall down,' Conchita screamed. She took a handful of coffee. The pulp oozed between her fingers. Conchita flung it to the ground and trampled on it.

Zaccariah leaned on the rake. He opened his mouth and belled with laughter.

'Go—on, Miss Conchita,' he said. 'Trace him some more!'

Conchita spat at him, but he skipped aside and the spittle fell into the pulp. Zaccariah raked over it.

Laura went for a walk. As usual, she went towards Montrose. Neil galloped past her, going in the opposite direction, without acknowledging her. Laura gazed after him before continuing her way. She soon came upon Prudence. Prudence was standing in the middle of the road near the star-apple tree. Her arms drooped beside her and her hair escaped in untidy wisps beneath her hat. She did not appear to see Laura or anything.

'You crying again,' Laura said.

Prudence's chin trembled. She seemed incapable of moving herself from where she stood.

'I said why you crying?' Laura said again. 'You got a need to cry. You know why? Because Neil doomed, and his land doomed, too. To me. He come to me when he want money. I buying him up. Ask him. I buy you too—for him. Even the ring you got on.'

Prudence bent over the back of her hand.

'You got reason to cry,' Laura said in a harsh voice. 'Is only time I buy up Montrose too, and everything. You know that, don't you, Prudence?'

Laura caught Prudence's hand. Prudence snatched it away and ran under the star-apple tree and into the banana walk.

'Is only time,' Laura said. 'All I need is time, and I will do it.'



It was a pity that Aunt Prue arrived on the same day at Newbiggin, begging shingles, that Halcem chose to return. He went brazenly to Laura demanding payment for Aunt Prue's yellow dress. While he stated his claim, he opened his hampers on the veranda and spilled his silks and satins and cambrics over the red-ochred floor. The cloth Laura resisted; but, a pair of white kid shoes with high heels destroyed her resolution not to buy from the Syrian. When he went, the servant women ran into the house to listen to Miss Laura calling Miss Prue a swindler and ordering her back to Matt. Samson drove Miss Prue home. She

did not carry any shingles. Samson did not like Miss Prue from long ago, and, judging by what Lucy told him while harnessing the buggy, he liked Miss Prue even less now.

Samson noticed the red of the sky as he drove back home. He called Miss Laura's attention to it. The whole sky glowed.

Laura was worried.

'You don't think is a storm brewing, Samson?'

Samson licked his thumb and held it up.

'No, Miss Laura. There just a little breeze, Miss Laura.'

'See if there is a warning up at the post office, Samson,' she said.

There was no storm warning. However, just to be safe, Laura summoned Levi. When he came, she ordered that all the animals should be driven into Newbiggin yard before nightfall. She wanted the turkeys penned and the windows nailed up.

Laura walked in and out of the rooms as the women worked. The servants whispered among themselves.

'Miss Laura too frighten', man,' Lucy tittered.

'Miss Laura got something to lose, Lucy,' Sarah said.

'All this botheration!' Ellen said.

'Trust in the Lawd!' Berta said.

'Berta, you don't got into no inore spirit?' said Lucy.

The women stopped whispering as Laura came near. They saw that she was pale.

'That roof!' Laura repeated to herself. 'That roof!'

The women looked at one another.

At that moment they heard the beating of wings. Soon the sky darkened as thousands of fleeing birds cried and whirled overhead.

★ ★ ★

It was after the lights were out that Neil heard the scratching on his window. He opened it. Conchita waited. She was smiling. She wore long ear-rings and perfume. Neil put out his arms and lifted her through the window.

★ ★ ★

Chapter Twenty-Two

'Vengeance! Vengeance! Death, death! Vengeance! Vengeance!'

Laura ran out to the courtyard where Conchita was shouting. Laura did not have to be told why Conchita was there. Laura went to Conchita and attempted to touch her.

'Take your hands off me. They got the sign of Death! Death, death! My mother dead. Death on this house! Vengeance!'

Laura slapped Conchita's face.

'Stop that,' she said.

'My mother dead. Is a sign. For the world wicked. Wicked. We all wicked. Too wicked.'

'Sarah, give her something hot, to drink. A mug of coffee,' said Laura.

Conchita threw up her hands. In one ear an ear-ring dangled and glittered. She caught her frock and ripped it across the chest. Her breasts, coffee-white and firm, sprang out. Conchita flung herself on the ground and rolled in the mud.

'Sarah,' Laura said, 'look after her. Levi!'

Levi came with his toes clotted in mud.

'Don't tell me, Levi. All gone. I seen the back,' said Laura.

'All gone, Miss Laura. All gone,' Levi said.

The people groaned.

'Is what I expect,' said Laura.

Samson hobbled to her and held out a long brown envelope. She took it and looked at the date stamp. It said Gayle. Laura smiled briefly.

'How it happen, Levi?' said Laura. She braced herself for the answer while she turned the envelope over and over in her hands.

'The roof cave in, Miss Laura. It bury her,' Levi said.

The crowd moaned and Laura felt the ground tremble under her.

'Broke all her bones,' somebody shouted.

'Pin her down,' said another voice.

'The roof catch her, Miss Laura, in her back and broke it in two, Miss Laura,' said Levi. He licked his lips nervously.

'Conchita . . .' whispered Laura. 'She escape.'

'Pshaw, ma'am!' Levi said, 'Conchita sleep out with man.'

Laura stumbled into the house. She threw herself upon the sofa and lay on her face seeing fat Mrs. Morgan with the roof beam pinning her back.

'Is not my fault. Don't nothing do with me,' she said.

Neil ran into the room and kissed her. She turned her head away. He was unshaven and his body smelled.

'Laura, I blow out. Clean blow out,' he said.

'You didn't got much to blow out,' said Laura. She wanted to hurt him, to remove the expression of restrained suffering from his face.

'Don't got much to blow out? Eh, Laura? You say so? All my life work? All I sweat and labour for all this past year? You don't forgetting the blow-out I got last year, Laura! God! Some people want got it all their way. Two year, two year in succession, Laura. Is a bad knock for me. All that money, all that work! Is drawing out you drawing out of that mortgage? I should know one little breeze would frighten you. I should know!'

Laura handed him the letter which Samson had given her. He ripped it open and a smile spread over his face.

'You know the papers signed, Neil. No need you talking like that. You got the cheque. What else you want?'

'What else?' He laughed noisily. 'What else! My God! What else, eh? I sell you my land so dirt cheap—if I knew there was a blow coming, I wouldn't. I wouldn't do that again.'

'Give me back the cheque,' said Laura. She put out her hand to him.

Conchita, in the kitchen, heard Neil laugh. She rushed into the house and flung her arms about Neil's neck. Neil peeled her from his body and flung her to the floor. Then he strode out of the room. Conchita ran screaming after him.

'My mother dead. Vengeance!' she said. 'Dead in my adultery. Mass Neil! Mass Neil!'

His switch stung her cheek lightly. Conchita screamed again and shouted to the labourers.

'You is all alike. Take. Take. Take. My mother dead. Vengeance. Is the roof. Miss Laura won't mend the roof. We not high folks. So the roof skewer my mother. Zekie pickney dead. You don't forget? Every year—Newbiggin swallow a life. My

mother now. Zekie pickney last year. Listen me, Next year, who? Who gwine to dead next time.'

The people growled, and Conchita darted among them with her breasts bouncing. She jabbed at their chests with a finger.

'Is you? Is you? Is you gwine dead next year? Is you, Mose?'

The people grumbled.

'Levi,' Laura said, 'get Conchita off Newbiggin land. Send somebody with her.'

'Murder!' Conchita said.

'And, Levi, send to that priest. Mrs. Morgan was a Roman. I would like her bury proper. The journeyman can make the coffin. She don't got nobody else do this for her. Conchita off her head.'

Laura went indoors where she could neither hear the whispering nor see the eyes which followed her. She held the mortgage contract in her hands, now. She found pen and paper and began a letter to Lawyer Reid. But she could not concentrate. A caved-in roof came between her eyes and the paper.

Suddenly she ordered her horse.

'You don't want no breakfast, Miss Laura?' Sarah asked.

'They say it caved in. Caved in. I didn't know it so bad,' Laura said.

There was a cockerel on Mrs. Morgan's roof. It strutted along the beam until it reached the weathercock. Laura watched it with interest. It climbed the weathercock and, with one foot on 'East' and the other on 'West', it flapped its wings and crowed.

Laura shuddered and the crowd fell silent.

'Is a sign, man,' a woman said.

'The Crowing Cock,' said another.

The silence became absolute again. Laura looked at the house. The roof squatted over the floor, belching the walls outwards. She turned her horse and saw Zekie watching her. Laura opened her mouth to speak. Zekie walked away. Laura went home.

In the afternoon Neil shaved and dressed himself to visit Montrose. He determined to go to MacKenzie and ask outright for a loan. He found the Busha walking up and down his veranda, but he also saw the doctor's buggy. Neil tied his horse to the veranda rail, knowing that Busha MacKenzie objected to it. But Busha MacKenzie said nothing. He glanced at Neil and continued to pace the veranda.

'You got a bad blow?' Neil asked to start a conversation.

Busha MacKenzie bit his lip.

'Well, you don't any worse off than me. You should see my place. My God! It will take a fortune—a fortune put that right.'

Busha MacKenzie took a breath.

'You don't think is time you put your hand in your pocket . . .?' Neil had been speaking with anger, but for the first time he saw the greyness of Busha MacKenzie's face. Neil pointed to the buggy.

'What wrong? You sick?' he asked.

'Prudence,' said Busha MacKenzie.

'Prudence! Why, only yesterday——' He checked himself and reddened. 'What wrong with Prudence?'

'Been sick for days. Not eating. Crying. Doesn't sleep. Fainted this morning.'

'By God!' Neil said under his breath.

'Don't expect it's anything much. Stomach, maybe. Best get the doctor.'

Neil found himself going down the steps. Maybe what Prudence suspected was turning out to be so.

'You don't suspect nothing?' Neil asked.

'Ate something, I expect,' said Busha MacKenzie.

Neil jumped into his saddle.

'Well,' he said and galloped away.

'Insufferable savage,' said Busha MacKenzie.

Neil spent the rest of the day at Charley's rum shop. By night-fall he was singing vulgar songs with his arms round the neck of the armour-bearer. He told her that nobody understood him. He was just a little boy at heart. He laughed loudly and caressed her breasts.

He told her that they were all alike. He meant women. Women were all the same to him.

The armour-bearer led him away.

Neil Naunton took the cheque next day to Gayle. He wanted to turn it into cash in case Laura decided to change her mind. It was tragedy, then, that the moneylender Cohen should appear beside him at the very moment that the cashier pushed the money under the grill. At first Neil shouted down everything Cohen said, but ended up by letting him have £25 on account. Neil shoved the balance of the money inside his shirt and started home.

Parson Bickett also was early on the road. He arrived at Newbiggin and found Laura sitting on the veranda. He climbed the steps with his hand extended. Laura touched it.

'What a morning, what a morning! So balmy,' he said.

'Is the calm after the storm,' said Laura.

'Yes, yes. The storm. You—you have been badly hit?' He chuckled. 'That's a foolish question. I'm sorry. Sometimes, it's good to be a parson. Then you don't have to wonder, every autumn "Will it storm, won't it storm?" It's much quieter for the nerves.'

'I can see that,' said Laura.

'But the Lord never chastises without reason, you may be sure, Miss Laura. Never without reason.'

Parson hovered near another chair, but Laura did not invite him to be seated. She rocked herself.

'There is the sad case of Mrs. Morgan——'

'She a case, Parson?'

'Well—indeed sad. A judgment, almost. They say that her daughter——'

Laura stood up and went to lean over the veranda.

'I don't expect you come here to discuss Conchita Morgan, Parson. For if so, at this time there's plenty to do.'

'Ah!' said Parson. 'Exactly.' He took off his spectacles, blew on them, then put them on again. 'You have my help. Be assured of that.'

'Your help, Parson?'

'Indeed. Indeed——'

'You don't helping Busha MacKenzie this year?'

'No—I——'

'Then you must helping Mrs. Naunton, then?'

'No. You see, I——'

'No, Parson? Well. Mean you don't run and offer them your help?'

Parson blushed.

'Well—I——' he said, and smiled

'Well?' Laura said. She threw her back against the railing and faced Parson. 'They don't got no use for you this year. Eh? That it?'

When Parson did not answer, Laura burst out laughing.

'Don't know how I glad see you, Parson. Get a laugh. I don't

got nothing laugh 'bout for too long, too long. Sarah! Sarah! Find Levi send him here. Levi my headman, Parson. Proud and lazy. You'll soon see Levi, in his white drill. So, you offering your help, Parson. But I don't want none, neither. Only help you can give me is a prayer. Get the whole of us out of this mess.'

'Everything is possible through prayer, Miss Laura. We, will pray together.'

'Here? Now?'

'Why not? God is here too. He is everywhere.'

Laura sighed and knelt against the railing with Parson.

'Gentle Father,' he said, 'the greatest and truest gift of Thine to man is the faith we hold in Thee. In this terrible hour of distress give us faith again and hope and peace. Amen.'

'Amen. You didn't say nothing about the bananas, Parson.'

Levi walked round to the veranda and coughed to attract attention. Laura smiled.

'You see, Parson? Levi, what you wearing patent leather shoes for? Who you think you is? Go home and take them off, Levi.'

'Is just try I trying them on, Miss Laura,' said Levi.

Laura sniffed.

'Get up the fall-down banana and stack them up behind the coach-house.'

'You want Ram Singh, Miss Laura?' asked Levi.

'You take me for fool, Levi? When you stack up the bananas see everyone get a stem. Don't nobody touch nothing else. The coffee all right?'

'It——'

'I will take a look at the huts myself later. See about the bananas. And get them shoes off your foot. Don't no headman work in my banana walk in patent leather shoes.'

Levi went off sullenly and Laura turned to Parson.

'You done all you can, Parson, goodbye. I got a headache.'

'God be with you,' Parson said.

Laura went to lie on her bed.



Neil wanted to turn back when he saw Busha's car before his house. But his mother saw him and called to him. He waved his whip at her and cantered up to the veranda. Busha MacKenzie,

his wife and Prudence were seated there with his mother. Only Prudence looked at him, and she kept her mouth open like a fish. He tied up his horse and mounted the veranda.

'Hot,' he said. 'Hot riding. Been on money business at Gayle.' He unbuttoned his shirt. Mrs. MacKenzie licked her lips and looked at her hands.

'You may have the courtesy not to undress before my wife and daughter,' Busha MacKenzie said.

'Eh?' said Neil. He pulled out the bundle of money, threw it on the table before him and buttoned his shirt again.

'Who's for a rum? Not this wishy-washy stuff. Lemonade is for children.'

He fetched himself a glass of rum and returned.

'Neil, Busha MacKenzie wants a word with you,' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Go on,' Neil said. He dragged a chair to the table and sat down before his money. He handled it and then he started to check the amount again. He felt certain Cohen had had a note too many.

'What do you say, Neil?' his mother asked.

He looked at her.

'About what?' •

'The—the baby. The baby. Yours and Prudence's.'

'I don't know what you talking 'bout. Don't try nothing on me, Prudence.'

'But, you heard Busha what he said. You have to marry at once. At once. Even so, there may be talk,' Mrs. Naunton said.

'Marry! Marry Prudence!'

Busha MacKenzie closed his fists.

'But for this cowardly trick, Naunton, I had intended putting an end to your association with my daughter,' he said. 'Many things have come to light about you since then—none of them good. You will marry my daughter at once. There's nothing for it. She's made her bed with you. You'll both have to lie in it.'

Neil drained his glass of rum. He packaged the money and put it back inside his shirt. Then he stood up slowly.

'What make you think you can talk to me like that, MacKenzie?' he asked.

'Neil,' said his mother.

'Stay outside this, Mother. This between MacKenzie here and me.'

'I've said the last word,' Busha MacKenzie said.

'No. I got the last word. You'll see. I got the last word.' Neil gave Prudence an enormous wink. It contorted the whole of one side of his face. A smile jerked swiftly over Prudence's face and was gone. She twisted the ring on her finger.

'You see, for several reasons, I don't aim to marry your daughter. So you see, don't no good you laying down ultimatums to me.'

Neil swaggered a few steps. In the silence his spurs jangled.

'You blackguard!' said Busha MacKenzie.

Prudence opened her mouth wider and noisy weeping came out of it. Mrs. Naunton went to stand beside her son.

'Put you in my place,' Neil said.

'How dare . . .' Busha MacKenzie spluttered. He hit the table with his fists.

'Robert!' said Mrs. MacKenzie.

'Yes, my dear,' he said.

'He don't like it. Well!' said Neil. He laughed. But he was suddenly angry. 'How dare you walk into my house and dictate my life to me! Don't nobody do that. Nobody at all. Prudence said is me. Well, I don't deny I been there. But who else? How many else been there too? When you leave that window open, Prudence, you sure is me come through it?'

Prudence bawled. The ring rolled off her finger and under a horse blanket on the floor. Busha MacKenzie took Prudence by one hand and his wife by the other and they went together to his car.

'I might tell you I got other plans myself, in that line—the matrimonial line,' Neil said.

The motor spluttered. The exhaust poured smoke. The car raced away.

'Neil,' said Mrs. Naunton. 'She wasn't a nice girl at all. Prudence wasn't a nice girl at all. What a deliverance you had.'

Neil patted her shoulder because her face looked old and grey and he was suddenly sorry for her.

'Is Laura,' he said.

Before she could reply, Neil was away to Newbiggin on his horse. He ran into the house.

'Laura! Laura!' he shouted.

'What a to-do, Neil,' Laura said, meeting him in the drawing-room. 'What a to-do!'

He grabbed her hands.

'Laura, my mind made up. That Prudence. Come to my senses. Everything fine, now.'

'Neil. Talk slow. What you mean.'

'I made up my mind, Laura, to marry you.'

'Marry me? You made up mine for me too, I expect.'

'Don't come all bashful, Laura. You always know you wanted me. Well, now you got me. Take me.'

'You stop where you are.'

'How long it will take with the banns going up, eh? Three weeks, a month?'

'Too fast. You engaged to Prudence.'

'No! I not. She got in the family's way. For me. You women. All alike. Then her father come down—large as life—ordering, ordering me to marry his daughter at once. At once!'

He laughed and swung Laura's arms.

'I told him that as I couldn't certain the little bun in the oven belong to me—I didn't want the honour of the lady's hand. You should see him, Laura. Shrink up to nothing. One hundred pounds. God!'

'I can't marry you, Neil,' said Laura.

'Can't? Come, now. No fooling?'

'No. Not now, anyway. I don't know I want to marry you at all. I want to sleep with you. You're so masculine! But I don't think I like you, Neil. That poor girl! So that's why she was crying.'

'You too soft-hearted, Laura,' said Neil.

'Go now, Neil. I want to cry. And I don't want you to see. I want to cry about something I wanted and couldn't get and lost, and I don't know what, Neil. I don't know what.'

'You don't make sense, Laura. Nobody don't making sense,' said Neil.

Laura pushed him gently. He ran his fingers through his hair. Then he went. His head throbbed and the sun struck hot. He was bareheaded. He beat the horse all the way home. Neil scarcely saw his mother when he mounted his veranda. The air swam. It throbbed with noise. Neil covered his ears.

'Darling, it was only a tiff with Prudence, wasn't it? If you go to Busha MacKenzie and say—and ask pardon, I'm sure——'

'Jabber, jabber, Mother. Jabber, jabber. My God! Can't you keep quiet a while?' Neil said. 'My head bad.'

'And no wonder! Look. You left your helmet on the floor. Is the head very bad, darling?'

'Is hell!'

'Come. Lunch is waiting. It's hunger. Nothing give you a worse headache than hunger. Come. It's cool in the dining-room.'

Neil followed her to the dining-room. He threw himself into a chair, then caught his head between his hands. He groaned. He was swinging in space.

'Neil! Neil! I will draw the curtains. It's the glare. There is a strong glare in this room.'

'My head, my head,' Neil said in the sing-song voice he used in school.

Mrs. Naunton pattered across the room to him.

'Stop your feet bloody clacking, Mother. Can't I get no rest. Do this, do that. Women, women! Don't I a man and got rights too? Tell me, Mother. Don't I got the right to suit myself?'

'Yes, yes. Rest awhile. The food will soon come in.'

'Blast the food!' Neil said.

'You need glasses. That's it, glasses,' Mrs. Naunton said. She stroked his forehead until his head lay against the fat of her body.

'Just a teeny-weeny better now? Ssh! Not a word. Not a word,' she said.

She continued to stroke his head.

'Darling, about—about what we were saying. You were joking, weren't you? About Laura. You were joking?'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

Neil swept his hand across the table. Plates and glasses broke on the floor. His feet scrunched their way to the door. They took him along the passage to the veranda and jumped astride the horse.

The horse galloped. The motion stirred his head and the pain lifted in waves to drown him. His body swayed in space, without weight. His hands grabbed at the saddle between his legs. There was no light. There was nothing. Nothing but drifting in space and white-hot pain.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The two labourers, loitering along the road, jumped into the watershed.

'Jesus! Look Mass Neil a-bounce. He will fall off, man,' one of them said.

'Come on,' the other replied.

They ran after Neil, with their cutlasses slicing the air. The horse turned into Duck Pond and galloped along the track. Suddenly it rushed into the undergrowth and branches scraped Neil from its back. The horse stopped. It turned briefly to its master.

Neil scrambled to his feet, stumbling and blind. He fell into a shallow ditch and groped his way out. There was the beat! The beat of blood in his ears, now. It came nearer as he went. He went to the beat. The beat was steady, like the pulse of his heart.

But, it was not his heart. The heart pulsed in his body and along his blood. This pulse was in the ground under his feet, and in the air. He bellowed in pain. The air was growing yellow. There was an orange mist at the corner of his eye.

The beat beckoned him. He followed the beat. It banged closer. He ran to it. It went chop, chop, chop, in front of him.

He began to pant. The noise hid behind a tree. It grew a tail and went 'LAUR-a, LAUR-a, LAUR-a!'

'Stop it,' his whisper said, 'stop it!' His hand clenched and hit his temples.

Now the noise went CHOP, CHOP, CHOP again.

The air grew yellow hot. It burst on his brain like lightning and shook his body.

He saw the noise now, moving up and down, CHOP, CHOP, CHOP.

'My head,' he said. His feet went forwards. His arms went out. They swung and swung and swung. And they said CHOP, CHOP, CHOP.

The mist floated away. He saw a bird lodged on a lily in the pond. The lily drifted.

He heard shouts which made him tingle. He jerked round and

looked with alarm at the bushes and the trees. He tangled his hair and shuffled his feet. The shouts came again, farther away.

Neil's hand was heavy. He lifted it to look at it. He saw that it held a cutlass. It was smeared with blood. He trembled and stepped back. The cutlass clattered against a stone. A twig snapped.

Sammy Johnson's head regarded him with surprise. Sammy Johnson's head was in the trimmed branches of a tree. It was bloody in its matt of hair.

Sammy Johnson's eyes were brown with yellow where it should be white.

Neil rubbed his hands down his leg. He knew that Sammy was dead. Sammy's eyes watched him. Neil brought a hand to cover his eyes so that Sammy would stop looking and accusing him.

But there was blood on his hand. He stepped backwards and backwards. And Sammy watched. Suddenly, the head overbalanced among the branches.

Neil ran. He skirted the body and ran and stumbled and ran. He listened and ran and made water on himself.

* * *

Laura was dreaming that battering-rams were being used against her door. She was alone in the house. It was night and she was afraid. She awoke in a sweat and the fear was still on her. She heard knocking on the door. It was rapid and insistent.

'Who's it?' she called.

'Me, Miss Laura,' said Samson. 'Quick, mistress.'

Laura unbolted the door. Samson was gasping on the step.

'What's the matter?' Laura said.

'Mass Neil—Mass Neil murder Sammy. Mass Neil murder Sammy Johnson. Mass Neil——'

'Catch you breath, Samson. Mass Neil don't murder no one. Talk sense.'

'Pon the Bible, Miss Laura. Chop Sammy head off. Clean off, they say. Sammy Johnson dead.'

Laura held tight to the door.

'It can't true!'

Samson opened his mouth and panted.

'True. It true. They gone for police.'

'Police! Wait, Samson!'

Laura stared across the wind-beaten banana walk and thought. 'He will come here,' she said. 'He will come here.'

'Yes'm. He gwine come here. He heading this way through the bushes.'

'Listen, Samson. Quick! Something wrong. Very wrong. Mass Neil wouldn't murder nobody. He 'fraid of blood. We got to help him. Get my fastest horse—'

'It tie up in the coach-house, Miss Laura—case you want it.'

'Listen. Quick! Don't interrupt. Saddle it. The servant women know?'

'Not yet'm.'

'All right. Saddle it, Samson. Use my best saddle. Throw a blanket over the saddle—hide it. Oh, God! Lead it down the river like you going to water it, then along the bank to where the water cross the road.'

'Yes'm.'

'All right. Now listen, Samson. Wait there—inside the trees by the road, out of sight. Don't no one must see, Samson.'

'Yes'm.'

'Samson, I relying on you!'

'Yes'm.'

'Go now, then. Hurry.'

There were tears in Samson's eyes as he darted away. Laura's eyes were dry, but her face was pale. The door stood open. There was a canvas bag hanging on the door between the kitchen and the dining-room. Laura shut the kitchen door. She fetched the bag and quickly put tinned milk, a loaf of bread, a hunk of ham, a knife, a tin mug, a serviette and a bit of brown soap in it. She returned with it to her room.

Neil was inside the room. Laura stepped back in sudden fear of the blood on him.

'Don't do that, Laura! Don't frighten of me. You got to help me. You got to help—me—'

He began to cry.

'I going to help you, Neil. Have no fear. I won't never let you down. Come.'

She took his hand and led him into her mother's room. Laura pulled the blind. She filled the basin with water and sluiced his hands. She wet a rag and washed the dirt and blood from his face.

'Take off your jacket, Neil,' she said.

'No. You want to give me up,' he said.

'You know I would never do that. You been good to me, Neil. When I was growing. You been good.'

While Laura talked, she helped him to take off his jacket. He seemed unable to do it for himself. Laura laid it flat on the bed and scrubbed the blood marks away, then she put it on him again. She used the rag to clean the legs of his trousers.

'Look, Laura,' he suddenly said. 'I got the money—for that land.'

Laura smiled. She reached up and patted his cheek.

'Put it back in your shirt, Neil. Thank God you got that.'

'That Cohen took twenty-five of them off me. I don't trust Cohen. You know, Laura, I never ever trusted Cohen,' he said.

'Moneylenders—they is all the same,' said Laura. 'I will have to cut off that hair off your face, Neil.'

There was loud banging at the front door.

'They come for me,' Neil whimpered. 'Laura, hide me. Don't let them get me, Laura, they will kill me, Laura.'

'Quiet,' Laura said, rubbing his cheeks. 'Into the wardrobe. You'll have to kneel down.'

The knocking increased. Lucy screamed. Sarah shouted. She was running towards Laura's room, calling her.

'What the noise over, Sarah?' Laura said, going into the drawing-room. 'What Lucy screaming so for?'

'Miss Laura!' said Sarah, 'Miss Laura!'

The veranda was crowded with men. Laura opened the door and looked at them with wrinkled brows.

'What wrong?' she asked.

'We come get Mass Neil, ma'am,' said a black man. He was the spokesman because he was a giant among them.

'Mass Neil? Here? Mass Neil don't live here? What you come here for?'

'He don't at his house?'

'Well, I don't know where he is. What's it all about? You is the speaker, Blackman.'

'Murder,' said Blackman.

Laura laughed. 'Mass Neil don't dead? Mass Neil dead, I bound to hear,' said Laura.

The crowd muttered.

'Now, you can all get off my veranda 'fore you trample it down with your dirty feet.'

'We want Mass Neil,' said Blackman. 'He don't at his yard!'

'You want Mass Neil, most likely he up at Montrose, up at Busha MacKenzie. Busha his father-in-law.'

Everybody began to talk at once. Blackman turned round and swung his cutlass over his head towards Montrose. Laura spoke to Sarah.

'Sarah, you and the women go home. I don't like it. There going trouble. Go now. Leave everything and go now. Before they return.'

'But, Miss Laura . . .' said Sarah.

'Do as I ask, Sarah.'

'Yes, mistress.'

Sarah lifted her skirt and blew her nose into it. She was crying. Sarah did not care who knew it. Only when Sarah was away, did Laura move to go back to Neil. She opened the wardrobe door and spoke quickly.

'You can come out now, Neil,' she said.

'I—I can't, Laura. Me foot, me foot won't stand up.'

'Yes, they will. They gone, and you must go too.'

Laura pulled him and he rolled to the floor. Little by little she helped him to sit on the bed. She buttoned his jacket for him and gave him water to drink. Then she took her scissors and clipped his moustache away. He did not complain, but his eyes followed her. When all the moustache had gone, Laura saw his lips were soft and daintily shaped below a white patch of skin. She found shoe polish and smeared his upper lip.

'You look different, Neil. Don't no one would know you—not even your mother, Neil. You ready to go now and God give you luck. Remember, Neil, nobody can recognize you now.'

'Nobody?'

'Nobody.'

'Wouldn't you know me?'

'Never!'

'You didn't really got no right to cut off my moustache, Laura. It gwine take years to grow back.'

'In another land, Neil, where no one will know you, Listen.

You must go now. Go down the back here till you hit the river, follow it to where it cross the road. Samson got a horse ready and saddled for you. Ride hard. Is a good horse, Neil. It will see you through. Get to Linstead fast as possible and climb the train for Kingston. You got money.'

'How long that will last, Laura?' he asked. He shrugged his shoulders.

'You must make it. Neil, you commit a murder. Hurry, for God's sake—else either you will hang or this crowd will kill you. Either way can't you see? You got to hurry. Look. Have this. Sell it and use the money.'

Laura found the sapphire brooch and gave it to him. He dropped it scornfully into his pocket.

'Is not much,' he said.

'Wait.'

Laura pulled out the tin trunk under the bed. She took out a roll of money and peeled off some. She handed it to Neil.

'I'll have all that,' he said. 'Cost money live in Kingston.'

'You to get on the first ship. The first ship, Neil. Get off the island. Jamaica no good to you no more. Go off with a new name. Call yourself anything.'

'What—all this fuss over?'

'Over murder! Murder, Neil. Anybody catch you, they kill you.'

'Don't give me away, Laura.'

'No. But give yourself a chance, Neil. Call yourself—Naunton Neil. Yes. Why not? Naunton Neil. Put it backwards, then you write to me and I know is you.'

'You will send me money?'

'Yes.'

'Running! I hate people running. All over that Sammy Johnson. I should have killed him before. Laura, he look so surprised, you know. I didn't even know I done it. My head just pain and then I see him . . .'

He shuddered.

'You got to forget,' said Laura.

Laura pulled him to his feet. She put the canvas bag over his shoulder.

'There's food in it and few things. May God have mercy on

you, Neil. God help you and keep you. May you find a comfortable home, wherever you go. Neil! Neil! I won't never forget.'

She was crying.

'Don't cry,' he said. 'Smile for me.'

Laura smiled through the tears.

'Send my horse and saddle back from Linstead. Remember, take the first ship out before police start looking elsewhere for you. Goodbye, Goodbye.'

'I always meant you to be my wife,' he said. 'Only, somehow . . .'

He touched her cheek with a finger.

'I know,' she whispered, and shut her eyes.

'Go now.' When she opened her eyes, Neil Naunton was standing in the ruin of the banana walk looking back at her. He swung his head round and began running towards the river.

Chapter Twenty-Four

•

Laura tidied the room. She put some of her new mail-order clothes on and the new shoes that Haleem sold her. Then she went to sit in the rocking-chair on the veranda.

The turkeys were joking in the back yard. Laura laughed and began to rock. The waiting was unnerving. When she heard a horse gallop into the yard, she stood up with relief and went outside. Whoever she might have imagined her visitor to be, the sight of Prudence MacKenzie slipping to the ground from her side saddle was a shock. Laura stopped and glared at Prudence. Prudence stopped and looked at Laura.

Then the two girls rushed together and hugged one another.

'Why you crying?' Laura said.

'I can't seem to stop,' Prudence said.

'You mustn't cry. Sec! It make you ugly—puffy and red in the face.'

'Yes. But it doesn't matter how I look. Ever again!' said Prudence.

'Nonsense!' said Laura.

Laura kept an arm about Prudence, and felt the warmth and sweat of Prudence's shoulders. She helped Prudence up the steps to the veranda and set her in the rocking-chair.

'Is my favourite chair. Man! It can really rock. Try it,' Laura said. Prudence smiled, and brushed aside a strand of yellow hair from her face.

Laura watched her, then unable to help it, she went to tidy Prudence's hair.

'It so yellow,' Laura said.

Prudence began to bawl open-mouthed and Laura started back angrily.

'Neil—Neil said it was pretty—my hair was pretty—pretty yellow, like gold,' Prudence said. She bit her knuckles to stop crying. 'Where is he? Please, you must tell me. Where is he?'

'Oh, I know all along, Miss MacKenzie, that the only reason you come to Newbiggin and rock in my chair is because you want something.'

'No——'

'Yes. Besides, why should I know? And if I did know, you expect me to tell you, Miss MacKenzie?'

'Yes, yes. Please tell me.'

'You almost have me believing you really worried about Neil.'

'I am. I am.'

'That's all you come about,' said Laura. 'For a moment, I don't know what I did think.'

Laura stamped down the step and stood there.

'I wanted to be here, with you, today. Today of all days. I wanted us to be together. But, for the same reason, I wanted to know about Neil,' Prudence said. She leaned towards Laura. 'Tell me about him. Is he—is he—is he safe?'

'What's that to you, Prudence? Why should I know? I don't know nothing, I tell you.'

'But he came to you!'

'Who told you that?'

'It's what they're saying.'

Laura mounted the steps again.

'Oh yes, Prudence. He come to me. Why not? Would you or your kind help a murderer?'

There was silence between the girls.

'I would have helped him,' said Prudence quietly.

Laura laughed.

'How?' she said.

'I would hide him, Laura.'

'She would hide him! She would hide him!' said Laura in a fit of anger to the Eucharist lilies.

'Yes, I would.'

'Where, then?'

'In—under my bed.'

'And, Prudence, don't that the first place they would look? How long you could hide him under your bed? Neil got long legs. He would get cramp.'

'Yes. You're right,' Prudence said.

'Nor your father wouldn't help him neither. Would he?'

Prudence hung her head.

'Would he?' persisted Laura.

'No. My father respects the law.'

'Even when that law concern his son-in-law to be?'

'No. You don't understand. My father wouldn't help Neil. He—he hates him. But I am not responsible for my father. I—I love Neil. I love him. But I'm so stupid. I'm not a bit clever, like you, Laura.'

Laura knelt before Prudence and took her hands. Then she smiled at Prudence.

'I think Neil safe,' said Laura. 'I try to get him away, Prudence. The mob won't get him. He got a good start.'

Laura burrowed her head in Prudence's lap and cried. Prudence stroked Laura's hair.

'Are you my friend?' Laura asked suddenly. She sat back on her heels and looked hard at Prudence.

'I think so,' said Prudence. 'Yes. I am your friend, Laura.'

Prudence smiled.

'Would you, would you like a glass of milk? It's really cold milk.'

'No, thank you, Laura.'

'Yes! It's from my own cows. You must taste Newbiggin milk, Prudence. It so sweet.'

'I don't want a glass of milk, Laura,' said Prudence. She laughed.

'Something to eat, then? What we got? Wait a minute. I will look.'

'No, Laura. I'm not a bit hungry.'

'Well, have a glass of water. The water come from my own spring. As fresh and cold and sparkling—the sweetest drinking water.'

'Oh, Laura! You are an odd girl.'

'Is only hospitality,' said Laura. She frowned. 'If you don't want my hospitality, no reason you should have it.'

'Laura, Laura! I got your hospitality now. For you took me into your home—when I—we . . .'

'For the baby,' Laura said. 'Don't surprised. Neil told me.'

'What shall I do, what shall I do?' Prudence said.

'You must be glad,' said Laura. 'You must go home now. Before the mob come back. They been here once. They will come again when they know I got Neil away safely.'

'I won't go, Laura.'

'You must. You must. There's a black man would kill the two of us with one hand.'

'I will stay with you, Laura.'

'They will hurt you and the baby and it will all my fault, Prudence.'

'We will watch and wait together.'

'But what would your father say if he know you here? No. You must go home—to Montrose.'

'I owe this to Neil and my baby and—to you.'

'For God's sake, Prudence! Don't so stubborn! They will riot. Think of your father!'

'I've disgraced my father. He says so. My father says so. I have driven them from their home. Laura, we are going home again, to Scotland.'

'Oh, Prudence! Just when we friends.'

'I've disgraced them,' said Prudence. She began to sniff again.

'I know what! You can stay with me. Don't no reason you go back to that Scotland. I will take care of you, and when the time come, the baby too. I will look after you. Like my sister.'

Laura hugged Prudence, who was crying loudly now.

'And not no one—not your father—can take you from me. You know any people in Scotland called Gray, Prudence?'

Prudence nodded.

'Really? Really and truly? What a little world!'

Laura shoved Prudence away.

'My aunt's name is Gray,' said Prudence.

'Really! Really and truly?'

Prudence nodded. Laura clapped her hands and jumped away to stare at Prudence.

'Prudence! They my cousins. You must be my cousin.'

'What?'

'Yes. Don't you see? Long ago a man called Gray come to Jamaica from Scotland. Way back, two hundred years, maybe.'

Prudence looked stupefied.

'You don't believe me, Prudence?'

'I do, Laura. I do.'

'Well. He was my ancestor. Only, a lot of women come after him and we called Pettigrew now.'

Prudence sniffed.

'Gray, that one that come more than two hundred years ago—two hundred and fifty years nearer . . .'

Laura paused and looked angrily at Prudence.

'You don't have to believe it. But, he was a great man. I am Scottish, you know.'

'Scot,' Prudence said.

'I am Scottish. My family is a great one. With great houses, far, far bigger than this one, and thousands—thousands of miles of land. And no end of servants. You not my friend. Not my true friend, Prudence.'

'I am, I am.'

'You look at me with your big, wet eyes and don't believe a word.'

'Yes, I do. I know your family was a great one.'

'How you know that?'

'You told me so, Laura.' Prudence licked her lips. 'I like the piano. I like to play the piano.'

They heard a horse galloping into the yard.

'Quick!' Laura said. 'Don't nobody must know you is here. Come and rest in my beu.'

Laura dragged Prudence into her room and hustled her into bed with her shoes still on. Laura covered Prudence with a sheet and hurried back to the veranda.

Mrs. Naunton waddled up the step and past Laura.

'Aunt Mabel!' Laura said.

'Neil! Neil! Darling, where are you? Neil?' said Mrs. Naunton.

'Aunt Mabel, Neil not here,' said Laura.

Mrs. Naunton paused to look towards Laura. It was a few moments before her eyes found Laura and focused upon her.

'You got him. You got him at last. He is here. I want Neil. Neil, Neil, Neil! My darling! Neil!' said Mrs. Naunton, hurrying from chair to chair in the drawing-room. She circled the room twice, lifting the cushions and pulling at the piano.

'Aunt Mabel,' Laura said. 'Neil not here, Aunt Mabel. He not here.'

'Where are you, darling? Come to Mother. I will make the head better. Naughty, naughty head. Come home to Mother, darling.'

'Aunt Mabel,' said Laura. 'Neil not here. I don't got Neil. He gone.'

'No, no. You hid him. You hid him for yourself.' She grimaced at Laura and whispered, 'You want my boy to use. You hid him.'

'I don't hide him. I don't want him,' Laura said.

'You always wanted my boy. But you shall not get him. You shall not.'

Mrs. Naunton slapped her chest and listened. Then she cackled.

'I hear him. I hear you, darling. They locked you up. They want to say nasty, nasty things about you. Untrue things.'

Mrs. Naunton hurried into Mrs. Pettigrew's room. Laura sat on a chair and shook her head. Presently she heard Mrs. Naunton screech, and almost at once run back to Laura in the drawing-room. She held Neil's moustache in her hands. Mrs. Naunton clawed at Laura's face.

'You murdered him. He's dead. The blood's on the bed. You got him. Give him to me! Neil, Neil, Neil!' Mrs. Naunton wailed.

She tottered into Laura's room. She saw the body on Laura's bed covered by a sheet. She threw back the sheet and lifted Prudence to her bosom. She slobbered over the face before her.

'Ssh!' she whispered into the hair. 'She will hear you. We must slip away quietly. She murdered you? She killed you? Ssh. She mustn't catch you.'

'Aunt Mabel, you frightening Prudence. Is Prudence. Is not Neil,' said Laura.

Mrs. Naunton rushed at Laura and slapped her face. Then she reversed to the bed and spoke.

'You won't get him now, Laura. You took Pettigrew from me when I took him naked and poor out of Borobridge. He was mine. He was mine but you took him away. Was wicked. Was wicked of you. I learned him to read and write.'

Mrs. Naunton started to sing in a high-pitched voice which quavered:

'Twice ones are two,
Twice twos are four,
Twice threes are six,
Twice fours are eight,
Twice fives are ten,
Twice sixes are twelve,
Twice sevens fourteen,
Twice eights six—
Twice eights six—
Twice eights six—
Twice ones are two,
Twice twos are four——'

'Prudence,' Laura whispered, 'she off her head. Slip past into Mother's room.'

'No. Don't go. Stay with me, Neil. Neil! Neil! I hear you, darling. Mother's coming. Shall Mother fix that nasty, nasty head?'

Mrs. Naunton lifted her skirt and tiptoed to the drawing-room. Her eyes were foggy. She stumbled against the furniture.

'Neil, Neil, Neil!' she said, and repeated: 'Neil, Neil, Neil!'

Her voice was like the cry of a cat.

'Oh, God!' Laura said. 'She mad. She mad. What to do? What to do?'

Busha MacKenzie had driven into the yard and Laura had not heard. He stamped up the steps shouting:

'Prudence, Prudence! Come home at once.'

Laura stirred.

'Who you calling, Busha MacKenzie?'

'Prudence. Come home at once and let's have an end to this foolishness.'

'So!' Laura said. 'You want your daughter? Is your daughter you want?'

'Neil, Neil, Neil! Neil, Neil, Neil!' said Mrs. Naunton.

Busha MacKenzie stepped into the house. Laura stood up.

'Keep your distance,' she said. 'Don't trespass in my house. What make you think your daughter here?'

'I know Miss MacKenzie is here,' said Busha MacKenzie.

'No. You don't know that,' Laura said.

'Neil, Neil, Neil! Neil, Neil, Neil!' said Mrs. Naunton.

'She is here. I know. Besides, her horse is outside running loose.'

'She's not here,' said Laura.

'Prudence! Come home at once and Mother and Papa will forgive you.'

'She's not going anywhere with you, Busha MacKenzie. She's staying here. "Mother and Papa will forgive you"! You always was the smuggest man I know.'

'I'm stopping the night with Laura, Papa,' said Prudence in the doorway.

Busha MacKenzie opened his mouth and Laura saw the resemblance between him and his daughter.

'Everybody come here for lost property. Listen her,' said Laura.

'Neil, Neil, Neil! Neil, Neil, Neil!' Mrs. Naunton cried.

'My God!' said Busha MacKenzie.

'Yes! Sounds like a sick kitten,' said Laura. 'And you come with, "Prudence, come home to Papa and Mamma and we will forgive you". Prudence not coming back to you. Prudence? You of age? You can do what you like. Mother want you, Papa MacKenzie, I shouldn't wait. I should hurry.'

'You mean this, Prudence?' asked Busha MacKenzie.

'The night, Papa. Just the night.'

He turned to go.

'Take her with you,' Laura said, pointing to Mrs. Naunton.

'Neil, Neil, Neil! . . .'

Busha MacKenzie entered the room and took Mrs. Naunton's hand. She followed easily, trailing a hand behind her.

'Neil, Neil, Neil! Neil, Neil, Neil!' she said. Her voice was small. It soon faded.

Laura ran back to Prudence. Prudence was shivering. She stood with her arms locked and her feet chicken-toed.

'I never defied him before,' Prudence said. 'He'll be so angry.'

'Oh, Prudence,' Laura said. 'I can't think what I was thinking. It's dangerous you stay here. I only surprised they don't come back yet. Though I feel certain they will come. Prudence, if I run after Busha quick, I will catch him. He will forgive you.'

'I want to pass the night here,' Prudence said.

'But there no telling what that mob will do. You see, Prudence, they don't—don't like me. They say——'

'They say you killed the baby? They say you killed Mrs. Morgan?'

'How you know?'

'I know.'

'You must go. You see you must go.'

'I'm tired,' said Prudence. 'I'm tired.'

'Oh, Prudence! What a friend I am! Who's that?' Laura called. She heard tapping on her back door.

It was Samson. He was grinning. Slowly Laura began to grin also. Samson took his hand from his pocket with a bright new shilling on it. Laura nodded and went back to Prudence. While she tucked her up in bed she told her of Samson's part in Neil's escape and of Samson's grin.

Laura put her arms round Prudence and laughed. Suddenly she sat on the bed, close to Prudence, and they wept. Prudence was quickly asleep. She was exhausted. While she slept, Laura went to play the piano. She played seldom and badly. Today she noticed the tinny sounds the piano made. The candlesticks were bent and black, and the cloth behind the fretwork was dirty red. It was also frayed. While Laura played the 'Minuet in G' she decided to get a new piano so that Prudence would have a good instrument to play on whenever she wanted to play. She ran to find the mail-order book. There was one, a rosewood piano which was beautiful. But Laura gasped at the price.

'I will have to find it,' Laura said. She laughed happily. She ran to peep at Prudence. Prudence slept with a hand across her face.

'I will have to find it,' Laura said. She pulled the bed-clothes and Prudence heaved and turned over. Laura sat on the edge of

the bed dreaming while Samson nailed up the back of the house. She sighed.

Darkness fell swiftly. Laura had dozed off when she heard a timid knock on the back door of her room.

'Eh! What's it?' she said in alarm.

'Miss Laura,' Samson said.

Laura opened the door.

'Quiet, for God's sake, Samson! Miss Prudence asleep.'

'Miss Laura, they come, ma'am,' Samson said.

'Who, Samson?'

'Miss Laura! Look, Miss Laura!'

Laura looked.

'Come into the house, Samson. Softly.' She spoke rapidly.

Laura looked again. There were bottle torches across the banana walk as far as her eye could see. They flickered and smoked. Laura locked the back door. She went from window to window. There was a ring of torches around the house.

'Light! Light! Let's have light. Samson! Fetch the lamps. Let's have light. In every room. A light in every window.' Laura shouted. 'Newbiggin is not afraid.'

Chapter Twenty-Five

Laura pinned on her mother's old straw hat, and her fear left her. She went to speak to Prudence. Prudence sprawled in bed. Her face was swollen.

Laura sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed Prudence's hair from her forehead.

'Is the yellowest hair I ever see,' Laura said. Prudence blinked. 'I got to go out to them now, Prudence. You is to stay here—they don't know you is here. Stay here and don't move or say nothing whatever.'

Laura stood up.

'They creeping up on Newbiggin, Prudence. They come, edging closer and closer. I can't see nobody face, not yet. They creeping up. Prudence?'

Laura sat down again.

'Sometimes it nice to have a friend, to have a friend back of you, Prudence,' Laura said.

'Oh, Laura!' Prudence said.

Laura patted Prudence's cheek.

'I'll go now. Samson will be with you. Don't frighten. Nothing won't happen to you. I won't let nothing happen to you, Prudence.'

Prudence raised herself on her elbows to watch Laura go. She heard Laura's heels banging the floor. When she no longer heard it, Prudence began to shake and her teeth to rattle.

Laura took the lamps from the piano top, and weighed them, one in either hand. Samson crouched near by. His eyes followed Laura. He swallowed twice, but the lump stayed in his throat.

'When I go out the door, Samson, shut the door quick, and bolt it, and bar it behind me,' said Laura.

'Beg you, Miss Laur', I beg you. Don't go out there,' said Samson.

Laura smiled.

'Is not everything a nigger man can understand, Samson,' she said. 'You stay with Miss Prudence and guard her, Samson. Miss Prudence my friend. Guard her well, Samson.'

'Yes'm.'

'Guard her, Samson.'

'Yes'm.'

'Now, open the door.'

Samson opened the door and stood aside. Laura walked past him with the lamps and stepped to the veranda. She heard the door shut and bolted. She opened her mouth and took a breath as the bar clattered into its slots.

Laura bit hard and moved to the veranda steps. She paused for a few moments before moving to the bottom step. She held the lamps at arm's length and turned slowly left and right.

She felt panic at the unbroken circle of lights. They were still now. Laura stretched her neck. She heard her voice.

'Who responsible for this? What you all think you doing?' her voice shouted, and she was reassured. 'Blackman! Blackman! Is you the leader?'

Laura waited. There was no response. The lights did not move.

'Why you don't answer, Blackman? You is out there. Don't tell me you isn't! You frighten of me?'

Laura laughed.

'See how your leader, your Blackman, frighten of me,' Laura shouted. 'He so coward he can't open his mouth! Go home. Go home, all of you, 'fore I lose my temper with you and send 'you all to the lock-up!'

The lights began to move towards Laura. She stepped back and hit her heel against the step. She stumbled, and the globes rattled on the lamps. Immediately the lights began to hurry. Laura breathed hard. She ran a few steps towards the middle of the lights and swung herself round. The movement of lights ceased.

'Don't come no farther. You hear me, not a step farther. I promise you. You come one inch more and I got you all—all—you hear me, Blackman?—all in the lock-up. Why nobody don't answer me? Speak up. Blackman, you hear me? Stop this nonsense! You forget who I am? I am the mistress!'

Laura ran round in a small circle.

'Listen to me. I am the mistress—the Mistress of Newbiggin. Don't nobody play with me.'

She held the lamp close to her face so that she heard the bugs inside the globes swarming to the blaze.

'See me! See me! Everybody see me! Is your mistress' this. Your mistress.' You can see me face. Get off my land! Get off my land! Get off my land! You got no right here. You don't got no call come here. Blackman! Why you don't speak? Answer me. Somebody speak.'

'Murderer!' a voice shouted.

Laura stood still. She put one lamp on the ground before her. She stamped her foot.

'Who said that!' she screamed.

'Murderer!' another voice shouted.

Laura ran from side to side.

'Cowards! Cowards! 'Fraid to own up. Too 'fraid to own up.'

'Murderer!' said the same voice.

'How 'bout Zekie pickney?' someone else said.

'Zekie pickney dead,' a woman shrilled.

'Miss Morgan dead,' a man said.

'Yes. And Sammy Johnson. Sammy don't nobody,' another voice said.

'You lie!' Laura said. 'You lie! Is you the judge and jury? I don't responsible for nothing. I will get you all shut up. I will get you all put away. Is me. Is Miss Laura. Is the mistress, speaking! Listen me! The mistress. Your mistress!'

The lamp before her shattered. Laura hopped back from the burning oil.

'Murderer!' voices shouted from every side. Laura heard a roar. The lights ran together nearer. The ground was heavy with sound. A stone knocked the hat from her head. Another grazed her hand which started to bleed.

'Stop! Stop! Stop!' Laura shouted. 'Don't come no nearer.'

No one could hear her voice. Stones crashed together and broke. They fell round her feet and skidded into the darkness. Laura set the other lamp on the ground. She saw the whites of eyes as bodies jostled together past her. She heard shooting. Feet pounded.

'You can't do this!' shouted Laura. 'I am your mistress. The Mistress of Newbiggin!'

She watched the rioters. They were running past her, flinging their torches away. A horse whinnied. The shooting continued. She heard swearing, violent and unrestrained. She saw a man on the horse, galloping backwards and forwards among the rioters, shooting in the air.

'Whoy! Whoy! Whoy-oh!' a man shouted.

The man on horseback continued to swear. Laura watched him. She forgot the rioters. Torches singed the ground with fire and died. Within a minute the rioters had gone.

A shriek of laughter came out of the darkness.

The man on horseback galloped over to Laura. She found that she was holding her hands. Her mouth fell open.

'Mr. White!' she said softly.

Archie White rubbed his face on his sleeve.

'Mr. White!' said Laura.

'Any time, Miss Laura,' he said. He was ugly with hate.

'Mr. White! But—how . . .'

'I heard the bastards plotting in the Chiny shop. I was outside. They didn't see me.'

'So you knew?'

'I knew.'

'Knew it was going to happen!'

'You got nerve. You is a real chip. The women was always better than the men in this family. They got guts.'

'You helped me,' Laura said.

'I had to wait for the right moment.'

'It was the rightest moment of all,' Laura said.

'You was plucky!' said Archie White.

'Plucky! Plucky! I lost my temper. Lost my temper!'

She picked up Mrs. Pettigrew's hat and flung it into the night. Archie winked.

'In our family we all got bad temper, eh?'

'Our family? You mean that—that you—is—my—my . . .'

Archie chuckled. He dipped up nuts from his pocket and flung them into his mouth.

Laura went close to him and looked into his face.

'I was gambling on you,' he said. 'I like gambling.'

Laura leaned against his horse.

'The stars shine so bright tonight, Mass Archie. I never seen them so bright before. They really pretty,' Laura whispered.

'Is the first time you see them, perhaps,' Archie White said.

Laura looked at him quickly—suspecting a joke—but saw that he was teasing her. He looked up to the sky.

'They pretty. Yes, sir. They real pretty,' he said.

Laura began to chuckle, Archie to laugh. Laura clutched at his stirrup and laughed with him. She laughed until weakness forced her to the grass.

Archie's laugh bellowed from him on long-drawn breaths. Laura heard the jingle of harness ornament as his horse moved away. She tried to call farewell, but nothing but laughter came.

Long after the sound of his horse's hooves died away Laura heard his laughter. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked across the yard.

Archie White's laughter drowned itself in the beat of a drum. Another drum brought a new rhythm, and singing began.

A prayer meeting had started.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sarah gave Laura her breakfast early next morning. She went into the kitchen and fed the servant women. Samson came in and eased himself timidly on to the mortar. Sarah pretended not to see, but she gave him a big mug of coffee and a chunk of bread.

The servant women looked at Sarah hopefully, but she shoved the bread back into its tin and challenged them with her eyes.

'We must thank God for a merciful deliverance,' said Sarah.

'Amen,' the others said.

'Amen again,' Sarah said.

'It was Devil work,' Ellen said.

'Amen,' Sarah said.

'How you know that, Ellen?' asked Berta.

'Is not only you know something, Berta,' Ellen said.

'It was a merciful and timeful deliverance from the Devil,' Sarah said. 'This is a happy day.'

'Amen,' Samson said. There was silence.

'You was there, Ellen,' said Berta.

'You lie,' said Ellen.

'Is true. You was there,' said Berta.

'The two of you was there,' Lucy said.

'You lie, Lucy,' Berta and Ellen said.

'Is not a lie,' Lucy said. 'You was there.'

'Well, shut up your mouth all of you, Berta, Ellen and Lucy. You was all there—even if you never fling no stone. You run 'way like the rest,' said Sarah. 'You was all three there. You want I tell Miss Laura?'

'Lawd! Miss Laura brave. Him brave, ch? Him brave, him brave, him brave so—till! Miss Laura mow them down like the wrath of God! So—them just cut and run,' said Samson.

'Get off me mortar, Samson,' said Sarah. She trailed her skirt past him to the kitchen door. Sarah sucked her teeth at length, then flapped her skirt at the labourers lounging and laughing in the courtyard.

'Murdering old niggers,' she said to the air. 'I don't like old nigger 'pon me kitchen door.'

At that moment, Laura walked out of the house. There was instant silence and stillness.

'Miss Laura vex so, man,' Lucy whispered.

'Sssh!' Sarah said.

Laura stood in the courtyard and looked from one sullen face to the other. The people hung their heads and stared at the ground. Presently they sighed and shuffled their feet.

'I don't suppose one of you come here last night to murder me. Eh? What 'bout you, Abimalek? I see you all turn up bright and early this morning. Eh? You come to Miss Laura for food. For work. That right? Is what you come to the mistress for?'

'Yes, Mistress,' the labourers said.

Laura laughed. She put her hands on her hips and raised herself on her toes and laughed. The people watched her. They laughed and chattered contentedly.

'What good getting angry with you, eh?' said Laura.

'Yes, mistress,' the people said. The courtyard was gay with happiness.

'Levi!' called Laura.

Levi swaggered up to Laura.

'You look too good for my headman, Levi,' Laura said. 'All that starch. Glve them all a bunch of banana and find them work. There's plenty work. Stop! Stop! I know what I want doing first. I want the courtyard wall put back, Levi. I is like Sarah. I like me 'courtyard pivate.'

Laura was still laughing. She turned to go back to the house when Nathaniel Brown ran towards her.

'Miss Laura,' he said.

'Catch your breath, Natty,' said Laura.

'I want you to know, Miss Laura, I didn't have nothing to do with last night, Miss Laura. I would never, never join in—'

'Save you breath, Natty Brown. You want know, is I still going send you to Mico? No? Why not? Whatever happen we still need teachers and inspectors of schools and parsons. You education safe, Natty. The prospectus come. You going to Mico in the New Year.'

Laura laughed at the incredulity in Nathaniel Brown's face. She went into the house.

'Miss Laura! Mistress, mistress!' Nathaniel Brown shouted.

Laura went to Prudence. She was awake and dressed.

'You made up your mind then, Prudence? You going home today?' said Laura.

Prudence bit her lip and nodded.

'Prudence,' Laura said. 'You don't understand. I mean it. I will look after you and the baby when it comes. I will care after you. You won't suffer nohow. Listen. There is a pretty piano—quite cheap. In the mail-order catalogue. I will send off for it this very day. Is a pretty piano. A rosewood. You would like that?'

Prudence nodded.

'You see? Anything you want. I sending right off for that piano today. I know you like the piano, Prudence.'

'I don't feel well,' said Prudence.

'Go back to bed, then. I will send your father away when he comes.'

'Laura, I've never defied him before.'

'No, I can see that. Is that what making you ill or the baby?'

Prudence began to sniff.

'Have some food,' said Laura.

'No.'

'Have a glass of hot milk with rum and an egg in it,' Laura said.

'I want to die,' said Prudence.

'No. You mustn't say that.'

'I can hear Papa's car coming, Laura. Goodbye, Laura.'

'Must you go? You don't need to,' said Laura.

'Yes,' Prudence said.

She ran out of the room and out of the house towards her father's car. Laura hurried after her. Prudence jumped into the car. Her father shut the door.

'Prudence!' Laura shouted.

Busha MacKenzie turned the car round and drove off. Laura saw Prudence's head buried in her mother's shoulder.

'Prudence!' Laura shouted. She ran a few steps and raised her hand. The car gathered speed. Laura's hand fell. Laura turned, without seeing, towards the banana walk.

★ ★ ★

Christmas and New Year came and went and Laura saw nothing of Prudence. Busha MacKenzie drove his motor car past Newbiggin occasionally, and paid several visits to Kingston, Samson said.

Laura rode to Montrose twice to inquire after Prudence. But each time she was told by a servant that no one was at home. Laura wrote to Prudence. Her letters were returned.

In order to buy the rosewood piano and have ready money, Laura raised a further mortgage on her land. In the meantime the new courtyard wall was built with the stones of the old wall. Nathaniel started his training at the Mico College in Kingston.

For the first time since Neil went away, Laura felt like visiting Mrs. Naunton. She had heard many rumours concerning Mrs. Naunton and Conchita, so that Laura was not unprepared for what she found in Neil's home.

Conchita Morgan lolled in an arm-chair on the veranda. Laura tied her horse to the railing and climbed the veranda steps. Conchita did not move.

'You lost your manners, Conchita?' said Laura.

Conchita turned her head away disdainfully.

'Not long ago you draggled in the dust before me.'

Conchita sucked her teeth. ' '

'Me don't want nothing from you now,' said Conchita.

'No, you don't. They say you living here, now.'

'I am the housekeeper.'

'How that come about?'

'Who else, then?' said Conchita, patting her belly. 'Is whose child you think I carrying?'

'Anybody's, I expect,' said Laura.

'You—you—you just jealous.'

Laura laughed.

'I don't need to thief nothing,' said Laura. 'The frock you got on? Belong to Aunt Mabel and you cut it down. Don't trouble deny it, Conchita. I know. Your boots belong Aunt Mabel. You know, Connie, you could go to prison.'

'She give me them,' said Conchita.

'She better, then?'

'No. She don't got no better to get better. She better dead. She drive me mad. All day long, mewling like a kitten, "Neil,

Neil, Neil!" Always three little wails. "Neil, Neil, Neil!" I tell you, Miss Laura, is only good nature make I stick here.'

'Neil, Neil, Neil!' Laura heard Mrs. Naunton say.

'Listen her,' said Conchita, jumping up. 'The servants let her out. I keep her shut up, but then they open the door and let her out! Every time, they do it to me.'

'Stop it, Conchita!' Laura said. 'You not the mistress here.'

'Yes, I am. This is my place, now. I will have my pickney here, in this house.'

Mrs. Naunton came to the door in a dirty silk dress.

'She looking younger!' Laura said.

'She don't do nothing—not even think,' said Conchita. 'Just wander round and round, round and round. Come on, old woman, come I'll give you Neil.'

Conchita took Mrs. Naunton's arm and pulled her into the house. Laura watched for a few moments, then mounted her horse and galloped away.

The labourers bowed to her as she rode past them. Levi touched his helmet in just the same way as Neil used to do. Laura ignored him. She beat the horse and galloped home.

Levi went home to Maria, his woman. He sat down in his rocking-chair in the privacy of the house and took off his boots. His toes came out of his boots, packed together. Levi twiddled his toes to restart circulation in them. Then he yelled for Maria. She ran in with a yabbah basin of corn-pone resting on her belly.

'We getting married, Maria,' he said.

Maria dropped the yabbah. It broke. Levi raised himself slightly and boxed Maria. Then he sat back and picked his toenails.

'We getting spliced,' he said.

'Mass Levi! What the women will say! Oh! What a thing!'

'I say we getting married. Banns going up this Sunday. You got to go to church with me. You can borrow them boots here. I will wear my new patent leather and my helmet. You must wear my old hat.'

'Me got kerchief, Mass Levi.'

'You want disgrace me? You want disgrace me with kerchief 'pon you head, Maria? What make I marrying you? I should

marry a nice cool-skin gal give me nice brown pickney. I got a position, Maria. And is you Parson Bickett?’

‘Parson!’ whispered Maria.

‘You think Parson is for only when you dead? Eh, Maria? You is real old nigger. Parson say—listen, Maria—Parson say I must set an example for the others to follow. He say so, he say so himself, Maria. Ask him.’

Levi yawned.

‘I don’t know what to do, Mass Levi,’ said Maria, weeping.

‘I gwine get a big roll-gold ring, and a real roll-gold tooth-cap for myself, Maria. So everybody can see we married. You don’t know, Maria, I gwine buy land?’

‘Mass Levi?’

‘God’s truth. Land, Maria.’

Levi groaned as he forced his feet into the boots again. He hopped outside, leaving Maria gasping behind him.

‘Zacci? You fix that job I give you yet?’ Levi asked.

‘Me don’t finish yet, Mass Levi.’

‘Then finish it. Finish it, Zacci. I think I gwine have to sack you, Zacci. You working slow.’

He hobbled back inside his house. He yelled for Maria, and she left the lean-to kitchen and hurried to him.

‘I want my account book,’ he said.

She brought it.

‘I want pen and ink,’ he said.

She brought them and stood waiting.

‘What you waiting for? You make any noise, I knock you down,’ Levi said.

★ ★ ★

A week later, Levi went to the kitchen door at Newbiggin with a letter.

‘Sarah!’ he called.

Sarah, who was grating coconut to make oil, made no answer.

‘Sarah!’ Levi said. ‘You don’t deaf.’

‘Is “Miss” Sarah you calling,’ said Sarah.

‘I not calling you no “Miss” Sarah. You servant woman think youself too fresh, again.’

‘Don’t rub me wrong, Levi,’ said Sarah.

'I will tell Miss Laura 'bout this. How you talk fresh to me.'

'What, Levi!' said Laura.

Levi grinned.

'I don't want no rowing round me kitchen door,' said Laura.

Sarah pushed her tongue out at Levi.

'Miss Prudence send this letter to you, Miss Laura.'

'Miss Prudence!' Laura snatched the letter. 'Where you see her?'

'Up the road, Miss Laura. She gone back home.'

'All right,' said Laura. She tore the envelope open and pulled out a sheet of blue paper. The letter began abruptly.

'I'll try to slip out with this. Perhaps I shall see you or can find a messenger to take it to you. I am going away tomorrow, all of us, first to Kingston. Goodbye, Laura. I will always remember you.

'Prudence MacKenzie.'

Laura was distressed.

'Levi, bring me horse,' she said.

'Yes'm. Samson!' said Levi.

'I said you, Levi,' Laura said.

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura rode to Montrose and through the gates to the veranda. Busha MacKenzie was standing on the steps. He was hatless, and Laura noticed that the crown of his head came to a point.

'I want to see Prudence,' Laura said.

'It's out of the question,' said Busha MacKenzie.

'Why? Because you afraid I'll see her big belly?'

Busha MacKenzie flushed and Laura laughed.

'You didn't know I know? I know. I guess everybody else know too. I want to see Prudence.'

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Why? That I can't see Prudence, or that Prudence can't see me?' asked Laura. 'I come all this way to see her. I going to see Prudence to say goodbye to her.'

'You appear to know all our plans, Miss Pettigrew.'

'Most of them.'

'Prudence is not available.'

Laura shook her head angrily.

'But why? Why?'

'As her father, I must determine what is best for my daughter.'

'Very well,' Laura sighed. 'It's so strange. After all this long time.' She threw out her arms. 'Everything must change.'

'It is the rule.'

'Everything packed up and going? Everything? Even the car?'

Laura turned to go.

'You taking your car or selling it?' she asked over her shoulder. 'I'll buy it. I was going to buy a truck, but I'll buy your car instead.'

'Would you take some advice?' asked Busha MacKenzie.

'I don't think so,' said Laura.

'You'd be more picturesque without my car.'

'You mean my money not good enough?' said Laura.

'No, no. I am selling my car. I intended to sell in Kingston. Can you drive?'

'I can learn!'

Busha MacKenzie smiled.

'Is that funny?'

'The price is fifty pounds, cash.'

Laura pressed her lips together.

'Leave it in my coach-house tomorrow morning. I'll pay you in one-pound notes! I got the money. What's it matter if I buy a car instead of a truck? They're both motors, the two of them.'

'Aye. But their purposes are different.'

'That's my affair.'

'Very well.'

'You selling your chandelier?'

'No.'

'I can't see your daughter. But you can take my money,' Laura said and galloped away.

Laura had not arrived back home more than half an hour when she heard the motor-car turn into Newbiggin gates. She ran out to the courtyard.

'Sarah,' said Laura, 'fetch Samson.'

Sarah ran out to the coach-house and came back with Samson. A groom followed behind Busha MacKenzie on a horse. Levi appeared. The servant women grouped themselves in the kitchen door. Laura went into the house to fetch the money. After she

had counted fifty pounds, there was very little left. She shrugged her shoulders, and strode outside. Busha MacKenzie was standing by the car. He took his goggles off and put them atop a rug on the back seat.

'I changed my mind,' Laura said.

Busha MacKenzie looked at her sharply.

'Not about buying your car and helping you out. No. About putting it in the coach-house. I want it where I can keep my eye on it. In the courtyard.'

'I see. You are going to build a shed for it in your courtyard?'

'I might, and then again, I might not.'

'This car won't go through that little opening.'

'Levi! Samson! Knock down the gate wider. Knock it down wider.'

The servant women ran outside to help. They were laughing and chattering. Samson could not believe it. He looked from the car to Busha to Miss Laura and ran to help carry a fall-down tree trunk to use as a battering-ram on the wall.

Meanwhile Laura examined the car. She did it thoroughly.

'Show me how you start it,' she said.

Busha MacKenzie showed her.

'Show me how you stop it,' she said.

Busha MacKenzie showed her.

'I know how to drive it now,' said Laura. 'I know how to blow the horn.'

Laura looked at the wall. A big section had been knocked down.

'Lift off the big stoncs,' said Laura to the people.

'Here's your money. Fifty one-pound notes. You can put the car in the courtyard now.'

Laura watched Busha MacKenzie stow the money inside his jacket. Then he drove the car into the courtyard and braked it. The people watching clapped hands. Laura went to sit on the wall, looking into space.

Busha mounted his horse and rode to her. Laura jumped off the wall and went slowly, with her eyes cast down, to the house. She heard Busha go. That was enough. She did not want to see him go. She picked out a tune on the new rosewood piano. It was a pretty piano.

In the courtyard, Levi, Samson and the women servants were fighting to get near the motor-car. Samson wore the goggles which gave him the appearance of a blindfolded mule.

'I responsible this motor,' said Samson. 'Don't nobody must touch it—less I say so.'

'Now, look here, Samson,' said Levi.

'One at a time,' Samson said, 'and you can all come and have a sit down in it. But don't touch it. Don't touch it, at all, at all.'

Samson fetched a large stone and wedged it behind the back wheel.

'So it won't run 'way,' he said, and laughed. This was much better than the horse-saddle he lost.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was February before Laura heard from Neil. She read the letter by lamplight, and she could almost see him standing beside her. His voice reached out of the page both to charm and to repel her.

'London. Dec. 30.

'Dear Laura,

'I hope this letter finds you in much happier circumstances than it leaves me at the moment. I am in London, England, and I will find out the right address and put it in before I close. I was lucky getting this lodging. A fellow I had a few drinks with and a few games of cards took me here. He is a big fellow bigger than me called Lofty with a thick brown beard. I don't believe the beard real after all. Then how are you. I tell you Laura I put all the blame on you hustling me away from Jamaica like that, this place is terrible, you don't know how cold. Just think I have to get some fresh clothes all wool and overcoat, a thing like a very long jacket. I just freeze day and night. What a good thing a drink is though. That how I met this fellow Lofty. He has a pretty sister, real blue eyes and white hair. What's more she likes me I can tell; so I aim to try my

luck there. Only I run out of cash. I didn't tell you she works in the pub which is where they sell drinks (bar to you). Her name is Poppy.

'Just fancy me here. Not a nigger in sight. The funniest thing Laura. Hope you true to me. What a girl you are Laura. But fancy me here and no money. By the way I got rid of that horse and saddle for £5 in Linstead. Hurry up and send some money for God's sake. A hundred ought to see me. You can find that eh. Just try. That's my girl. Sometimes I feel I will just join up and be done. After all they give you free food and clothes and everything eh?

'Goodbye. This is a long letter. They got gas light here. The real thing I tell you. This is a big city. I was sicker than a dog on the ocean. You should try travelling sometime.

'With best regards,
'Naunton Neil.

'What a girl Poppy is. Hurry up that cash.'

Laura put her head down on the letter and cried.

'I don't got the money, Neil,' she said. 'And if I had that Poppy wouldn't get her claws on it.'

Next morning, Sarah noticed that Laura was looking ill and urged her to go back to bed. Instead, Laura went out to the coach-house to look at the tackle. Some of the leather was beginning to crack. She went angrily to find Samson. Laura knew where to find him. He was in the courtyard washing the motor car. He washed it every morning with water brought by himself from the river.

'Leave the car, Samson,' said Laura. 'When last you oil the saddle and things?'

'But, Miss Laura, the car . . .'

'Just leave the car. Next thing I know you praying to it.'

Samson pushed the bucket of water out of sight and went to give the leather a quick oil. He could not spare much oil on the saddles, he needed it for the car. Under the car, there was a growing black patch. It was oil.

No sooner had Laura entered the house than Haleem drove his two pack donkeys through the gate.

He had brought some special silks for Laura and shoes and white silk stockings. Laura rummaged through his stock like a child, exclaiming and admiring everything she saw. She took six dress lengths of silk, the stockings and the shoes. Haleem smiled amiably when Laura told him to charge the things to her account.

On the way out, Haleem paused to admire the car. He opened the door and fitted himself behind the steering column. It was a snug fit. He looked at the engine dripping with oil and peered into the water tank.

'Don't touch that, don't touch that!' Samson shouted.

Haleem stood up and saluted. Presently he was hurrying behind his donkeys out of Newbiggin.

A month later Laura had another letter from Neil. The address was 'In Transit'. It read.

'Dear Laura,

'I followed Lofty (you remember I told you about him) into the army and now they sending us to France to fight. Fight. Me! When I hate fighting. It all Poppy's fault. Poppy said a man in civilian clothes a coward. What a fool I was. Poppy nothing but a flirt. She would flirt with a T&M Cat!! Now I am landed in this mess all on account of Lofty. Lofty won most of my money off me. You didn't send that hundred I asked for. Hurry up Laura. My God. The Food. You would never understand. It so bloody tasteless. Ah well. Anyway here I am and I wish to God I was back home in Jamaica in the warm and never feel cold again. I just can't stop shivering sometimes. And all the shouting telling you off over everything. You wouldn't believe. And when I knocked down one of the fellows I had to peel potatoes, me in the Cookhouse (kitchen to you). I should never left Jamaica. That's the place for me. First chance I get I will run away back home. Then we will see. I don't promise. How is Mother? Hope well and you also.

'With best regards,
'Naunton Neil.

'Hurry up the money.'

'But you can't do that, Neil,' said Laura. She pushed the letter into its envelope and went to bed to toss about till morning.

During that night, Conchita's baby was born. It was a male child, and Conchita called it Neil, after its father. Nobody could deny its parents. As Conchita pointed out, the child came out of her body, yet it was the image of Neil.

A week later, Laura, unable to restrain her curiosity, went to see the child. Conchita was stretched out on a sofa on the veranda with the baby lying in a drawer beside her on the floor. Laura lifted the baby without a word and hugged it. The baby Neil opened its eyes and stared at Laura. They were as blue as the sky. Conchita watched Laura lazily, with a smile on her lips.

'I worried over the old woman,' said Conchita.

Laura had forgotten her.

'What?' said Laura.

'The old woman won't leave the baby alone.'

'Aunt Mabel? How is she?'

'She not no better. If I don't watch out, one day she smother Neil.'

Conchita clapped her hands.

'What you mean, "smother Neil"?' Laura asked.

'Stifle my baby. My Neil,' said Conchita. 'Celestina, bring out something cool to drink. Doubtless Miss Laura like a drink?'

'I'm just leaving, Conchita.'

'As you please,' said Conchita. 'Bring me a drink, Celestina, and put a drop of you-know-what in it, eh?'

Conchita laughed. Laura put the baby back into the drawer.

'I got to go,' said Laura.

'Everytime she let out of her room she try to stifle my Neil,' Conchita said. 'I thinking, perhaps I will have to put her away.'

'You wouldn't dare,' Laura said.

'Oh, yes I would. Legal too, in time,' said Conchita. 'But I got a girl for Neil.'

'You made yourself very comfortable,' said Laura.

'Is my home. Me and Neil. I'm working up the land too. It gone down very bad.'

'One day you going to find yourself in trouble—real trouble,' said Laura.

'My only trouble now—is milk. Big as I am, I don't got it.'

'I don't neither.'

'You got lots of cows,' said Conchita, sitting up.

'They're my cows,' Laura said. She looked back at the sleeping child in the drawer. 'Wonder why I never like babies?'

'Maybe because you don't got none, Miss Laura,' said Conchita. 'Anyway, I order a saddle like yours. A side saddle.'

'Well,' said Laura, and trotted away on her horse.

When she got home she woke up Samson. He was sleeping in the back of the car with the rug covering him.

'Samson,' said Laura, 'I don't think I want this side saddle no longer. When you see Mass Archie tell him take back the saddle.'

'Miss Laura, you gwine drive 'bout in the motor car?' said Samson. His eyes glistened.

'You gibbering, Samson,' said Laura. 'I want a proper saddle. I done with side saddles for ever.'

'Yes, Miss Laura. But Miss Laura, I buy a cap, mistress, to wear in the car.'

'Someday, perhaps, Samson.'

Laura left Samson. He shook his head and lifted an oily rag from the front seat. He crawled under the car to busy himself.

★ ★ ★

Laura came back from the fields one day to find a fat man with a bald head on her veranda. He was smoking a cigar.

'Who you?' said Laura.

'Cohen, H. Cohen,' he said.

'Oh, the Jew! Well, first of all, you can stamp your cigar out,' said Laura. 'I don't know what you got to say, but say it quick before I set the constable on you.'

'That no attitude to take—someone in your position,' he said.

'From where I standing, H. Cohen, my position is good.'

'I could take you to court,' he said.

'You not by any chance threatening me?'

'I wouldn't put it that way,' said the Jew.

'Stand up,' said Laura. 'I didn't invite you sit down in me chair on my veranda.'

'Very well,' said the Jew. 'Whatever I expected, this treatment I never expected.'

'Perhaps is because you lisp?'

'I will sue you. I will take you to court. I have your signature,' he said.

'You can go to the devil,' Laura laughed. 'You won't get no money out of me. You can take me to court. Sue me. Sue Mr. Naunton property if you want. Go on. See if I don't set my lawyer on you, Mr. Shady Cohen. Go and work your tricks somewhere else, Mr. H. Cohen!'

Cohen shook his fist at Laura. Then he hurried away.

About a fortnight later, as Samson was swearing at the mud churned up on his car after the heavy rains, he became aware of two dirty feet much too close to the front wheels of the car.

He looked the man up and down and was about to warn him away when he noticed the orange letter in the man's hand.

'Who the telegram for?' said Samson.

'Man! What a pretty car,' the stranger said, and immediately Samson felt more disposed towards him.

'You don't move no closer to my car. Who the telegram for?' Samson said.

'Miss Pettigrew.'

'Take it 'way. Miss Laura got the Banana Order already. Telegram bad news. Take it 'way.'

'Is important. I got to hand it to Miss L. Pettigrew, himself,' the stranger said.

'What the telegram say?' asked Samson.

'Is important,' the man replied.

Samson took the telegram between his fingers and examined it.

'Wait where you is exactly,' said Samson.

He took the telegram to the house. Laura signed it and sent a shilling to the bearer. Samson hovered beside her, watching the telegram as Laura turned it over in her hand.

'Wonder who it from, Samson?'

'Maybe is another Banana Order, Miss Laur', said Samson.

Laura fanned herself with it.

'Samson,' Laura said softly, 'I don't like this telegram.'

'Yes'm.'

Laura tore the envelope. She read the writing once, then she read it again. The War Office said that Neil was killed in action. Neil was killed in action. Killed in action. Laura crushed the paper in her hands.

'Samson, Samson!' she screamed.

'Miss! Miss Laura, ma'am?' said Samson.

Laura's eyes were wild. They stared into space. Neil was killed in action. The women servants huddled in the doorway to watch. Samson waved them away.

'My horse! My horse!' shouted Laura.

'Coming, Miss Laura,' said Samson.

She rode to see Mrs. Naunton. She sat on the horse staring at the baby Neil while Conchita speared coconut on a knife, dipped it in a calabash of wet sugar and stuffed herself with it.

Laura continued to stare at the child and Conchita continued to eat.

'Celestina!' called Conchita.

The woman came.

'Take Mass Neil inside the house,' said Conchita. 'Miss Laura don't like baby.'

A ring sparkled on Conchita's finger.

'That ring,' said Laura, 'is mine. Is my diamond ring.'

She jumped off the horse and flung herself at Conchita.

'Take your hands off me,' said Conchita. She clutched Laura's sleeve and pulled it. The sleeve ripped from Laura's shoulder.

'Is my ring,' said Laura.

'Is mine. I find it,' said Conchita.

'Neil, Neil, Neil!' mewed Mrs. Naunton.

Conchita pushed Laura away. She caught Mrs. Naunton's arm and hauled her into the house.

'Celestina! Next time I lock her up and you let her out I drive you away. You hear me?' Conchita bawled. 'As for you, Miss Laura, I can get the milk. You didn't so stuck-up we could friends!'

Laura mounted her horse and galloped away to find Parson Bickett. She tracked him to a small-holding belonging to a man named Tucker. She sat in her saddle and shouted for Parson. He ran out of the hut followed by Tucker, his wife and family.

'Parson,' said Laura, 'I want you to say a memorial service for the dead.'

Parson's mouth opened. Laura pushed his hand away that was held up to her to be shaken.

'Another—dead?' he asked.

'I said a memorial service, Parson, not a funeral service.'

'Oooh!' he said and smiled. 'I had often thought how nice it would be to have a memorial service for your mother. Mrs. Pettigrew, your mother, was a most respected person in the community. I should say, the most respected—'

'Parson Bickett, you don't seem to understand. Nothing to do with Mother. Mother so righteous, she don't need a memorial service. I want a service for a sinner who didn't got a chance to pray—if he knew how—before he died. Before he died horribly. Horribly!'

'Yes. Indeed. Sammy Johnson's end was a swift one,' said Parson.

'You jumping again to conclusions,' said Laura. 'I not thinking of him.'

'You want a memorial service?' asked Parson.

'For the dead,' said Laura.

'Just so. For whom, Miss Laura?'

'That's my business.'

Parson smiled.

'I should be delighted to be of any service to you, Miss Laura. You know that?'

'Well, then . . .'

'But I must know for whom you desire this service.'

'Why?'

Parson took off his glasses and squinted at Laura. ,

'It's customary,' he said.

'Listen, Parson, if you do this—custom or not—I give the kirk a font, a real good ten-pound font. Now then!'

'I am sorry, Miss Laura.'

'You mean you won't do it?'

'I cannot.'

'You refuse?'

'I cannot.'

'I command you,' Laura said.

Parson remained silent.

'I command you,' Laura said.

Parson bowed his head.

'You won't get the font otherwise,' said Laura. 'You still refuse?'

'I cannot,' Parson Bickett said quietly.

Laura kicked the horse and galloped back to Newbiggin.

'Neil!' she said to the trees.

'Neil!' she cried to the wind.

'Neil,' she whispered, 'I tried to bury you. I tried to bury you clean and just!'

That night, when finally she fell asleep, she had a nightmare. She was out in the darkness with nothing above her or beneath her or around her. She followed a voice crying 'Laura, Laura, Laura!' The voice came from nowhere, but it belonged to Neil. She heard the stammer of gun-shot and the screams of the dying. And the voice drew her down and down and down. . . .

Before she hit the bottom, Laura woke up. Cocks were crowing. A light signalled dawn. Laura got out of bed and lit a lamp and watched the morning break.

The following night, Laura had another nightmare. This time she was prowling through a wood with trees two hundred feet high. It was cold. The air was green. The trees dripped long slimy tentacles which caressed her as she walked. She ran. Neil's voice called: 'Laura, Laura, Laura!'

'I'm coming!' she shouted. But her feet could not move. They grew roots and the tree tentacles lapped her round and as they crushed her in their embrace, Neil called: 'Laura!'

'I'm here,' Laura shrieked.

She woke up. That morning, Laura ordered that one of the servants should stay every night in Newbiggin.



Every day Laura saw new children playing around the coach-house. They ran whenever she came near. One morning she surprised a small boy making water against the kitchen step. He was naked, and a bulbous navel balanced itself on his belly.

'Stop that!' Laura said.

'Moomah!' the boy yelled. He ran into the kitchen and put his head in Sarah's apron. Sarah slapped his bottom and disowned him. He ran yelling into the banana walk. Laura watched him.

'Is your pickney, Sarah?' Laura asked.

'Yes'm,' Sarah said.

'What he doing here?'

'I don't go home a-nights, m'm, me pickney come see me a-day. I tell them stay 'way, mistress. But they come. I will beat them up. See if I don't beat them up.'

Sarah cried with shame. Laura laughed.

'Dop't do that, Sarah,' she said. 'I didn't know you got pickney?'

'I got—five, Miss Laura.'

'Oh! Who the father?'

'They different, Miss Laura. They got different father.'

'Of course. Well, I don't want naked boy baby pissing over me step. They come and see you—give them food. I don't want the house crowded with pickney.'

Laura turned to go.

'Sarah!' she said.

Sarah blew her nose in her frock tail before she answered.

'Yes'm.'

'Don't lick the pickney.'

'No, mistress? I mustn' lick the pickney?'

'No, Sarah. Sarah! Berta got pickney?'

'One, mistress. A girl pickney.'

'Lucy got pickney?'

Sarah laughed out loud.

'Not yet, Miss Laura.'

'Of course. Ellen got pickney?'

'Pshaw, Miss Laura! Ellen frig, frig, she don't got none. She don't no good.'

'Is Easter time,' said Laura for no reason.

* * *

Nathaniel Brown returned home from Mico College where he was studying. He came to see Laura the next day, in freshly starched clothes. He did not offer Laura his hand.

'Miss Laura,' he said.

Laura looked him over.

'Turn round, Nathaniel Brown,' she said. 'You downright grown more. You grow more?'

'No, Miss Laura. I am thinner,' he said, 'therefore I appear to be taller.'

'So that's it, eh? You look taller. You like your new school, Natty?'

'The Mico College is something more than a school, Miss Laura. You might say, it is the parent of schools. It is a very fine institution——'

'Stop, Natty. You don't mean say is an "institution"? Why, all the institution I know is for poor people and such,' said Laura, sitting down in her rocking-chair.

Nathaniel Brown smiled briefly and coughed into his hand.

'There are various kinds of institutions, Miss Laura.'

'And Mico is one, eh?'

'You could put it that way, Miss Laura.'

'You not getting it free, Natty.'

Nathaniel Brown sighed.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'I chose the inappropriate word——'

'Eh! All them long words!'

'Words are the instruments of our thoughts, the expression of our will, the clarity of our ideas,' Nathaniel Brown said.

'You just made that up, eh?'

'Yes, Miss Laura.'

Laura took a breath.

'You can reel off algebra too, I bet you anything,' she said.

' $(x + y)^2 = x^2 + 2xy + y^2$.'

'My God. That don't mean nothing, Natty!'

'I assure you most vehemently, Miss Laura, it does.'

'Well!'

'Take the letter "Y". Or "X",' he said.

'What that first something mean?' asked Laura.

'The Unknown Quantity.'

'It sound real known to me.'

Nathaniel Brown smiled.

'In the end they are all terms which we subjugate. Take Latin. You get the declensions, the conjugations and the syntax. We juggle them into words, into sentences. "*Pater amat filium*"—— "The father loves the son"—Latin. Very interesting. Very interesting, Miss Laura.'

'So!' said Laura. 'Tell me what else they learn you beside big words, Natty Brown. Tell me.'

Laura leaned towards him.

'They show you how you hold the knife and forks and the cups and saucers? Eh? And take you hat off to a lady? And brush you teeth! Oh Lord, Natty! You look real savage. Go back to college. Learn all the Latin and algebra and such. Make yourself into a gentleman if you think you can. You might quite manage it, Natty. And then work for a big post like an inspector of schools. For, Natty, I will tell you right now, I expect you to make a parson. You not nobody fool, Natty. You come here today smiling and preening yourself, Natty, because Miss Laura don't speak Latin and can't say algebra, Natty. But as you see, Natty Brown, it don't matter at all, at all. I still Miss Laura. Not so? I still Miss Laura.'

Laura leaned back in the chair and rocked herself. Nathaniel Brown's hands entered his trouser pockets and jumped out again to dangle by his side. Laura yawned.

'Enjoy yourself, Natty,' she said, 'and come and see me again before you go back to Kingston. It will do you good. Maybe you got something to learn from me, Natty.'

'Yes, Miss Laura. Goodbye, Miss Laura,' he said.

'Goodbye, Natty.'

Nathaniel Brown tiptoed away. He hated himself for doing it. But Miss Laura's eyes were shut and he would not disturb her.

Laura's eyes were not closed. She watched him through her lashes and laughed softly to herself.

It was Levi Jones, however, who gave her the greatest surprise that day. She was sitting on the courtyard wall talking to Samson when Levi boldly approached her with an offer for a piece of her land.

Laura laughed noisily. Levi did not smile.

'You joking, Levi?' she said.

'Me serious, Miss Laura. I is a married man now and got position. I got to got land, Miss Laura,' he said.

'Oh, Levi!' she said. 'You is a real joke, eh? A real joke.'

Levi never forgave her for laughing at him and calling him "a joke" in front of Samson.

Samson asked Laura for a coat to wear in the car to keep off the dust. Laura jumped off the wall.

'Samson,' she said, 'I going for a walk. I stay here longer and Sarah, Berta, Ellen and Lucy will come and ask me for something

too. You know, Samson, you got to have cash, ready cash, to buy things. Look at that idol you polishing. You know what that is? Ready cash, Samson. What you want with coat, eh?

'To keep out the dust when I drive, Miss Laura,' he said at once.

'I never know you was 'fraid of dust? You want coat, you go find Chi-ju-ju, the obeah man, and get him work a magic trum all the dust in this yard into gold dust. I buy you' coat then.'

Samson dodged behind the car.

Laura went for a walk. She was still smiling at the idea of Samson dressed in coat, cap and goggles when she met Conchita. Laura intended to pass her without recognition, because she remembered that she had degraded herself by fighting Conchita. But Conchita wanted to talk to Laura.

'Miss Laura,' Conchita greeted.

Laura flushed and walked on.

'Miss Laura!' said Conchita. 'Celestina! Hide the baby. Miss Laura hate baby.'

Conchita turned and walked beside Laura. Laura stopped.

'What you want, Conchita?' Laura said.

'I not begging, Miss Laura. I want milk. I can pay for it. I want milk. You don't sell me, I can get it other ways. You don't sell me, I get all your labourers from you,' said Conchita.

'Try,' said Laura.

'I want milk for the baby.'

'Well, then, buy you own cows.'

'I can get milk. Oh, I can get all I want. I want yours. You sell me your milk yourself, I tell you something. I just passed that Levi. H'm! I want your own milk from yourself. We can friends together.'

'You got milk,' said Laura, walking away.

Conchita gripped Laura's bun of hair and tugged it. The pins flew out and the hair flopped down her back. Laura caught Conchita's hand and bit it. Conchita kicked Laura. Laura pinched Conchita's cheek and twisted. Conchita screamed and clawed Laura's face. Laura screamed and broke Conchita's coral necklace and the beads scattered.

It was a few moments before Conchita and Laura became aware of Archie White watching them. They heard him laugh.

'Use your fist,' he shouted.

Laura shoved Conchita away and ran back towards Newbiggin. Conchita raced after her. Archie White galloped between the two girls. Conchita stopped and panted.

'The dirty white shit!' she screamed. 'Think she too good for me. Can't even give the baby milk!'

'What you mean, Conchita?' Archie White asked.

Conchita talked.

Archie White caught up with Laura as she turned into Newbiggin.

'Miss Laura,' he said. 'You make me ashamed of you.'

'Mind your own business,' Laura said. She shook her shoulders and strode ahead.

'I aim to. I want paid for them cows I drove in here. Is a long time now I wait—'

'Don't apologize asking for your money,' she said.

'I don't apologizing! I want my money. Now. Today.'

'You won't get it,' said Laura.

'I will get it,' Archie said.

'You can't get blood out of a stone.'

'I can. Out of this stone I can.'

'Try, then.'

'All right. I will drive them off today.'

'You can't. I won't let you.'

'You can't stop me,' Archie said.

He began to grin.

'Grin all you like. They is my cows. You not driving none off.'

'Oh, no? You wrong. They is my cows. You don't paid for them.'

'And what about all the pasture they got and all the care?' Laura said.

'What about all the milk they give?' Archie said. He threw nuts into his mouth and the ruby on his finger sparkled.

'You is nothing but a savage. Cousin! You is nothing but a monkey.'

Laura ran home. Archie went away and arranged for the cows to be driven to Conchita.

When he went to collect his money Archie White found Conchita romping on the veranda with a young man in a straw hat and a creased suit of white drill.

'This my young man,' Conchita said. 'He's my lawyer. You is my lawyer, isn't you, Sugar-Plum?'

'Yes, Sugar,' said the young man.

'Then pay Mr. White for the cows what I buy off him. My lawyer looking after all my business now and handle all my cash for me, Mr. White. Don't you, Sugar-Plum?'

'Yes, Sugar,' said the lawyer.

Archie White saw a sheet of paper on the table covered with scrawl. He thought he read the name 'Mabel Naunton'. The writing wandered over the paper and often off the page. Sugar Plum kept his eyes on Archie White. Sugar Plum sauntered to the table and covered the paper with his seat. Then he counted the money to Archie from a thick roll. Archie White took it. Whatever chicanery Conchita was hatching was no concern of his.

★ ★ ★

Within a few weeks Levi complained to Laura that the labourers were slacking off and staying away from work. When Laura pressed him for details, he confessed that they had deserted Newbiggin and gone to work for Conchita, who was offering fantastic wages.

'What I pay you for, Levi? Get them back. Double the wages. Do anything. Work for Miss Conchita! They belong Newbiggin!'

Laura screamed. She kicked Levi's shins. Levi lifted a corner of his lips so that his rolled-gold tooth-cap glistened at Laura. He knew that his time would soon come now.

Every afternoon Conchita paraded herself and her child and nurse past Newbiggin. Then her side saddle was delivered. After that, every afternoon she trotted past Newbiggin with the nurse struggling behind carrying the baby Neil in her arms.

Laura tramped up and down before her house and watched Conchita every day.

★ ★ ★

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next time Haleem came to Newbiggin he drove pack mules. He drove them up to the veranda and unloaded them there. He handed a box to Laura.

'Specially for you, Miss Laura,' Haleem said.

It was a pair of shoes. They were crimson. Laura opened her mouth to exclaim, but no sounds came. She kicked off the last pair of white shoes that Haleem had sold her. They were wrenched and dirty. She wore no stockings. Laura wriggled her feet into the shoes and lifted her skirt.

'Oooh!' she said.

Haleem smiled.

'They dear,' he said.

'I must have them.' She walked about the veranda with her skirt high above her ankles.

'I got you a red dress with red velvet roses, and a hat with roses and cherries all round the crown, too,' Haleem said.

'Let me see them, quick!'

She hopped. Haleem handed her a large flat box and a smaller square one. Laura was breathless with pleasure.

'Sarah!' she called. She held the dress before her. 'Is just my fit.'

Laura pinned the hat in her hair.

'It will fit better,' she said, 'when my hair rolled up and combed.'

Sarah and the servant women gasped at the clothes. Laura became reckless.

'I just like all them pretty things,' she said.

Haleem put several lengths of dress materials beside her. He smiled.

'You can drive that car, Miss Laura?' he asked.

'I don't intend to bother. But I can if I want to,' said Laura.

'It want driving,' he said. 'You could sell it.'

'No,' Laura said. 'Haleem, I hope you know how much stuff I taking off you? I don't got no money today.'

'I write it down,' he said.

On the way out he did not glance at the car. But he knew that

Samson was asleep in the back of it. Before he was through the gate, Laura had dressed herself in the new clothes. She strutted into the courtyard with the servants behind her clapping their hands and exclaiming. Laura went straight to the car. She dragged the rug off Samson. He sat up. When he saw Laura, he jumped out of the car. Samson, Laura, Sarah and the women servants all saw the little brown egg roll into a corner of the seat.

They shouted with laughter. Lucy clucked. Berta crowed. Samson picked up the egg and examined it.

'Boil it for him, Sarah,' said Laura. She went to her seat on the wall. As she was wearing new clothes, she blew at the dust before she sat down. She was waiting for Conchita to trot on her horse past Newbiggin.

Before Conchita came, however, Levi did.

'You don't go to the bank today, Miss Laura?' he said.

'No,' Laura said.

'Paybill tomorrow, Miss Laura.'

'No paybill tomorrow,' Laura said.

Levi exposed his rolled-gold tooth-cap.

'I will go and get the money, Miss Laura. I understand bank.'

'You? Send you to bank, Levi?' Laura laughed. 'You is a joke, Levi. I don't got no money fer paybill. There 'won't no paybill, Levi.'

Levi pulled in his lips.

He bent down to wipe the dust off his patent leather shoes.

'I got a few pound, Miss Laura. I draw out my money yesterday.'

'Levi? That Conchita?'

It was Conchita. Laura jumped off the wall and deliberately turned her back to the road. She tilted her hat and minced towards her front door. Laura went to the drawing-room, flung back the piano cover and fumbled her way rapidly through the 'Blue Danube' waltz. Then she began again, and accompanied herself with her singing. She crashed a few discords and swung round on the piano stool.

Levi was standing behind her.

'What you doing in my drawing-room?' Laura shouted. 'Sarah, open the window let out the smell.'

Levi backed to the veranda. He held out a wad of money to her.

'What is it?' Laura said.

'Money, Miss Laura.'

'Where you got that?'

'Is my savings, Miss Laura.'

'Give me!' said Laura. She snatched the money from Levi.

'Is for land, Miss Laura.'

Laura was counting the money.

'I want a piece of Water Bottom, Miss Laura, build a house.'

'I will rent you piece.'

'I want buy, Miss Laura,' Levi said.

Laura sighed.

'A thing like this you want think over, Levi. You can't rush into something, saying "I want, I want". I'll keep this money, Levi. And sleep on it. You get my answer after the weekend.'

Next day Levi recognized his money at paybill.

On Monday he went to Laura. He was in a happy mood, fully expecting to realize his ambition to own land before the morning was out. His grin was less bright when he saw Laura's face. She was not smiling.

'What you come for on a Monday morning to my front door, Levi?' she asked.

'Me money,' Levi said.

'Money! Oh, yes. Fifty pounds! The shock you give me! You come for it? You say one more word 'bout that money I stick the police on you. Is thief you thief it from me. How come you got fifty pound, Levi?'

'I save it, Miss Laura.'

'Save it! You! I can't save sixpence and you—you save fifty pounds. Take me for a fool?'

'I swear God . . . ' said Levi.

'The order come for banana. Find three hundred good stem and send them on the cart. One day I must get a truck. You can find three hundred stem of bananas? You better, Levi. I got too much to pay off.'

'I don't know, Miss Laura,' said Levi sullenly.

'Well, you better get three hundred stem off to the beach or you lose your job, Levi. You wouldn't like that, eh, you wouldn't like lose your job?'

'No, Miss Laura.'

In the evening Levi brought the news that an accident had happened to the banana waggon. A wheel had worked loose and the waggon had capsized. The bananas were bruised and unsaleable. No one could account for the accident. Laura caught her breath.

On Tuesday Levi reported that the labourers had refused to work, but he thought he knew a way to force them.

On Wednesday Laura agreed to sell him two acres of Water Bottom.

Within a week the shingles and timber from Mrs. Morgan's house started to disappear. In less than a month they were part of Levi's new house. Levi's new house had five rooms and a floor and a long veranda. Before it was finished, Levi, his wife and family moved in. Levi acquired a slattern for his wife to shout at and bought himself a pair of second-hand silver-rimmed spectacles from Haleem.

He put the spectacles on when he mounted Miss Laura's horse to ride the property every morning, and took them off at night when he returned from work.

Levi found walking difficult now. He had corns. Soon his eyes began to swell and water. He was getting fat.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Haleem came again, driving his two pack mules before him. He left them standing outside the courtyard to talk to Samson. Samson was greasing the car. He put the tin of axle grease on the front seat to talk to Haleem.

'Is in good condition?' asked Haleem. His tone was respectful.

'Good condition,' said Samson.

'It ready to drive out right now?'

'Yes. It got gas in it.'

Haleem went back to his pack mules and led them to the veranda where Laura awaited him.

'Today I got some silk from China, Miss Laura,' he said. 'And velvet as blue as a peacock.'

'Show me. Quick!' said Laura.

'It dear,' he said.

'Well, open the hampers, Haleem. I don't care it dear!'

Haleem began to undo the straps.

'I could get you a new carpet, from Persia or India or Turkestan. But they cost money.'

'A new carpet. Yes. A new carpet and some new curtains too.'

'This velvet, now, for the curtains.'

'Yes. Oh, yes. I will have it. The whole roll. And the silk. If I don't buy it, Haleem, you don't got nobody going buy it?'

'Miss Conchita Morgan is my good customer, always.'

'You don't sell her nothing you sell me, Haleem.'

Haleem smiled.

'You selling the car, Miss Laura?'

'No. But I got a piano I don't want.'

'You should use the car, Miss Laura. It will go bad otherwise.'

'No. It not for sale, Haleem. Don't talk no more about it.'

'You need a husband to drive it for you.'

Laura blushed.

'I will take the velvet for the curtain and the silk and order that carpet from Turkey. I is the best customer you got, Haleem.'

Haleem began to repack his hampers.

'I'll need settlement of my account today, Miss Laura.'

'Today? What you mean, Haleem? You don't hear all the bad luck I been having?'

'I also hear you owe a lot of bills, Miss Laura. Everybody knows that.'

'How dare you say that to me?'

'I'll take these velvets and silks to Miss Conchita. She will pay me cash and double what I asking you.'

'I want these things, Haleem.'

'I will give you twenty pounds for the car—and you can take some more goods on account.'

'Never! Twenty pounds indeed! I already told you, Haleem, the car not for sale.'

'I hate to tell you, but as a man I can see certain signs the car rotting where it is. Another few months, it is all rust. Is only because you is a good customer why I make this big sacrifice for you, Miss Laura. That car don't worth half that money.'

'I don't believe you. I give fifty pounds spot cash to my friend Busha MacKenzie for it before he go. He wouldn't do that to a friend.'

'But, is business, Miss Laura—business. In business you take all you can when and where you can and in any way. You got to think of yourself, in business. Nobody don't think of you.'

'All the same . . .' Laura said.

Haleem sat down and prepared to argue.

'You say you pay fifty pounds for that—for that, box, falling down. Well, you should get advice before you do a deal like that.'

'I might—might—take a hundred,' Laura said.

'Ah, well!' said Haleem. He stood up. 'I may as well put the hampers back on the mule. What you think of my mules, Miss Laura? Just bought them.'

'You had them last time you come, Haleem. They too thin. They look sick.'

'Sick! Tired maybe, walking all day long, yes. Thin, perhaps, too. Just a little. They want good pasture fatten them up a bit more. Ah, well. Pity about this velvet. Still, I did say I would bring Miss Conchita something nice.'

'No, I want it.'

'Look here, Miss Laura. I'll take the car and give you all the silk and velvet you just choose now, plus twenty pounds.'

'No.'

'I take out my heart to you,' he said. 'It bleeding. All right. You can have one of the mules. They good beasts.'

'What I want with mule?'

'You could sell it? The car, and I give you the cloth and one mule and twenty pounds?'

'No.'

'I mentioned I would have to get the account settled today. It would go against my nature to get a lawyer write to you.'

'I won't give up what I got,' Laura said.

Haleem sighed. Suddenly he clapped his hands and hunted through a hamper. He handed Laura a box. In it were a mirror, a comb and a hair-brush. They all had silver backs.

'Is lovely,' Laura said.

'All right, now. The car against—a mule. All right. The two mules. The cloth you want and this little hair-brush set. How

about that for a very reasonable offer indeed, plus the twenty pounds I promised?’

‘Well . . .’ said Laura. She bit her lip. ‘My friends wouldn’t like me parting with the car.’

‘Pshaw! They won’t know. Twenty pounds in hand. The cloth you choose today. This silver-back table set. Two mules. My God! You getting near seventy pounds, much less fifty.’

‘Well . . .’

‘Is it a bargain? Is it, Miss Laura?’

‘Well . . .’

‘Here, look! A present. Just a personal token—a beautiful piece of cambric for—for—’

‘All right,’ Laura said.

Haleem breathed out. He wiped his forehead with a kerchief.

‘You’ll see,’ he said, ‘you won’t regret this.’

He hustled. He dragged the hampers to the car. He flung out Samson’s goggles, cap and coat to the ground and wedged his hampers in the back. Then Haleem took the saddle cloths off the mules.

‘Oh, Gawd!’ said Samson, Laura, Sarah and the women.

‘Just a bruise,’ said Haleem.

‘Them sores are blown,’ Laura said.

Haleem smiled.

‘They’ll heal in two days. You watch it.’

When Haleem had stowed all his goods away, he opened a small case. He took out a pair of goggles and put them on. He looked at Samson. Samson held on to Sarah. Haleem pulled out a cap and flapped it to remove the creases. Then he put it on. Finally he pulled on some gloves.

‘The money,’ said Laura, ‘the twenty pounds.’

‘Oh, yes, Miss Laura. I will have to hold that twenty pounds of course, against your back accounts. You remember it was twenty pounds plus what cloth you took today, plus the two mules—mules fetch plenty money, you know—and the silver set and the little present. I got your account written down here. One moment, please, and I’ll look it up.’

Laura had gone pale. She licked her lips as Haleem brought out the book.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Haleem. ‘By a strange coincidence, you owe

me exactly—twenty pounds. Twenty pounds. Well, it give a neat settlement, anyway. Goodbye, Miss Laura.'

'No, no! You can't! You mean I don't get no money cash?'

Haleem started the engine and drove from the courtyard, through the gap knocked out months before. The mules stood where he had unharnessed them, too sick and apathetic to move.

A square patch of grass marked the car's residence in the courtyard. Samson began to cry. He ran after Haleem, then turned back and ran to Laura. He shook a finger at her and wept. Then Samson went back to the coach-house. He found a corner among the cobwebs where he was left undisturbed to weep.

How long Laura sat on the courtyard wall she did not know. It was perhaps an hour. She dozed a little, for she was tired. When she woke up she saw Conchita galloping towards her. Conchita was already on Newbiggin land.

Laura jumped to the ground. She waited for Conchita. She was horrified to see that Conchita was wearing a red velvet dress, hat and shoes identical to her own. The only difference was that Conchita's were clean.

Laura sprang towards Conchita. Conchita spread her ring-laden fingers at Laura as she galloped round her. Conchita's neck was covered with jewellery, and she wore brooches thick on her bosom like medals.

'Thief, thief!' Laura screamed. She tried to follow the horse's tail.

Conchita cackled.

'Take that!' she said and tossed something into Laura's face. Laura looked on the grass. It was the diamond ring.

Laura chased Conchita. Conchita's horse galloped in a circle. Laura caught Conchita's foot. Conchita kicked. Laura fell to the ground.

'Is all legal, Miss Laura. Laura!' shouted Conchita. 'I sick of this place. I sick of you. I getting out.'

She galloped away.

'Samson! Samson!' shouted Laura. 'Saddle me a horse!'

While Laura waited, she tramped up and down. She watched Conchita go. Conchita waved from the gate and Laura turned her back and walked away. When she looked again, Conchita had gone.

Levi came to Laura.

'I hear you got a piano selling, Miss Laura,' he said.

'You black bastard!' Laura screamed.

'I only ask. My wife, Maria, want a piano.'

'Don't come to me,' said Laura.

Levi sucked his teeth, but not too loudly lest Miss Laura heard.

★ ★ ★

Laura saw Aunt Mabel on her veranda. Aunt Mabel was writing. She looked old and ill and her clothes were dirty.

'Aunt Mabel,' said Laura.

Mrs. Naunton was writing 'Mabel Naunton, Mabel Naunton,' over and over on a writing pad. When she came to the edge of the paper, she wrote on the table. When she came to the edge of the table, Aunt Mabel whimpered and immediately began to mew: 'Neil, Neil, Neil! Neil, Neil, Neil!'

'Write your name,' said Laura. She put Mrs. Naunton's hand on the paper and put a pencil between her fingers. 'Write your name,' said Laura.

The house was too still. Laura entered it. It had the musty smell of a place long shut tight.

'Conchita,' called Laura.

A servant girl appeared.

'Miss Connie take the buggy and gone 'way with her young man, mistress.'

'Gone?'

'She say she never coming back, mistress.'

'She gone 'way?'

'Yes, mistress.'

Laura sighed.

'You looking after Miss Mabel?'

The servant girl sulked and stubbed her toes against the skirting boards.

'Isn't you?' Laura said.

'Yes, ma'am.'

Laura looked through the house. The wardrobes were empty. The trinkets had gone.

